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by

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2020

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How District Leaders and Middle School Principals use Title I Funds at the Campus Level: A Study of the Ongoing Planning and Decision-Making Process by Educational Leaders at the District/Campus Level

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**How District Leaders and Middle School Principals use Title I Funds at
the Campus Level: A Study of the Ongoing Planning and Decision-
Making Process by Educational Leaders at the
District/Campus Level**

by

Kermit Demetrius Ward

Treatise

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

The University of Texas at Austin

December 2020

Dedication

I am fortunate to say that I have several people that I dedicate this degree and accomplishment to; however, the person that rises to the very top of my list is the matriarch of my family - Robbie Jewel Walker. Rob (Mom) this is clearly in honor of you. For the part of good within me, the good intentions that exist within my mind, and my heart for people, I have the foundational understanding that you put it there. Your magnanimous personality has clearly set a standard of unselfish love, a loving and giving spirit when you were here that will certainly not be matched. There are often times in my adulthood that I have felt a hint of regret and guilt of the sacrifices you made for yourself so that I could have. Simply put..... I had the absolute best mom that made no mistakes with me along the way and that has everything to do with me seeing the end of this program.

Hosie Lee Ward, my dad, I so very much wished that I had your equanimity! Those early morning conversations consisting of words of encouragement, advice, or just guy talk should be considered epic and sacred. Being raised along with cousins who had none or minimal relationships with their fathers, I understood the value and privilege of that at a very young age. I have never taken our talks, trips, or the lessons that you have taught me for granted. Keep them coming.

To my grandfather, Mr. Claud Walker, Sr., long gone but definitely not forgotten by me. You had one name that fit everyone the exact same way and that was "Daddy" and we all know why. You were the consistent strong male role model that many of your grandchildren had from day to day. I am grateful for the eight kids that you raised that

ultimately turned into my system of support, the time that you invested in me, and those well-earned and needed spankings with that thin black belt.

My aunts and uncles, Quience Wright, Barbara Foxx, Clarence Walker, and Claud Walker Jr, you all were my mom's extra set of eyes and ears whenever she was not around. They say that it takes a village to raise a child; I definitely felt like I lived in one then and perhaps more importantly now. I pray that you all continue to serve as her voice in her absence for many more years to come. I love you guys. I can speak well of the impact that a single teacher can have on student outcomes.

I had two that I consider highly relevant to me and my pathway to this point. Mrs. Sue Johnson, you had higher expectations of me that I did not want to accept or even believe I could deliver; yet you never flinched and this proves you were right. I fully understand now that you cared when there was absolutely no motivation to do so and oddly that is so very rare in this profession. Coach Tarl Lloyd, your persistence over my first summer out of high school that I get enrolled in college instead of joining the military was likely all I needed to hear. May you two continue to have the fortitude and health to continue to care for and support our youth in the way that you supported me.

Last, to my children, you are some of the best kids I know, and you simply won't believe how proud each of you have made me in so many diverse ways. Often there are times that I feel that I do not deserve to be referred to as your dad. Although you were not here when I entered college after high school or when I finished, you all unknowingly served as motivation for me to finish my bachelor's degree and then my master's degree. This doctoral degree should definitely set a new standard for you and your children and

create a mindset and reference that anything is possible if you want it bad enough. Learn to dream it first. Continue to live your very best life.

Acknowledgements

I am incredibly fortunate to be part of the leadership legacy from the University of Texas at Austin and the brand awareness that comes with that having a degree from the State of Texas' flagship university. The program itself and the members within it are considered by many to be elite and I am thankful to enter into this fraternity. I owe thanks to program directors Dr. Ruben Olivárez and Dr. Pat Pringle. Your ability to push me and grow my leadership capacity has developed my vision for schools and myself. Perhaps more significant was the amount of care and concern you had for me, the individual, instead of the student when my career took a left turn. You two have no idea how much your investment of time during those days had a profound impact on the completion of the program. You two never flinched to show me care and concern and that shall never be forgotten.

To my friends, Dr. Tracy Robinson, the fact that you were already here served as my motivation and the words of advice and encouragement should be considered monumental. We make a great team and should work together one day. This accomplishment was not easy and it comes with many no's. The no's led to temporary feelings of ineptness several times yet today the no's make for a great story to tell. Diane Cox, I continue to look back at that blunt conversation we had at the midwinter conference that got this all started. That to-the-point conversation was all it took to re-ignite the will and grit required to get this completed. Thank you for consistently seeing more in me than I see in myself.

Finally, thank you to all the students, teachers, parents, and principals I have had the opportunity to lead. There are several leaders that would love to lead such a fabulous group of individuals, yet I was blessed with the opportunity. Thank you for allowing my leadership to shape and touch your lives and your support for me and your work to shape mine.

I belong here!!!!

Abstract

How District Leaders and Middle School Principals use Title I Funds at the Campus Level: A Study of the Ongoing Planning and Decision-Making Process by Educational Leaders at the District/Campus Level

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2020

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The purpose of this research was to conduct a comparative case study that illuminates the aspects of planning and decision making between two high performing and two low performing middle schools serving similar student populations within two separate school districts. Each district was represented by two high performing and two low performing Title I middle schools. Decisions for campus expenditures of Title I funding rests almost solely with the campus principal, even though their training and professional development for budget development, management, and best practices in using Title I money is regarded as minimal or nonexistent. Middle school settings were chosen as the focus of this exploratory study due the importance of the middle school experience in preparing secondary students for the rigors of high school. Four major research questions were developed as follows because they represent the domains of

spending available to middle school principals throughout the fiscal and academic year:

(a) What is the ongoing planning and decision-making process for the allocation, distribution, and utilization of Title I funds for the high-performing middle schools? (b) What is the ongoing planning and decision-making process for the allocation, distribution, and utilization of Title I funds for the low-performing middle schools? (c) What ongoing middle school planning and decision-making processes for the allocation, distribution, and utilization of Title I funds are shared between the low-performing and high-performing middle schools? (d) What differences exist in the ongoing planning and decision-making process for the allocation, distribution, and utilization of Title I funds between low-performing and high-performing middle schools? The design was a basic comparative case study to allow for exploring the experiences of principals using Title I funds at middle schools that were meeting the state's academic standards with an accountability grade of at least a B and middle schools that were not meeting the state's academic standards with an accountability grade of F. Two major sources of information were the district- and campus-level improvement plans and the perceptions of the two districts' Title I coordinators as well as the four middle school campus principals. Two low performing middle school principals and two high performing middle school principals were interviewed. Additionally, the Title I coordinators for the districts at which the selected case middle schools were interviewed. The middle schools met the inclusion criteria satisfying the contextual and academic performance conditions in accordance with the four research questions guiding the study. A total of nine themes emerged in the findings:

- Theme 1: The allocation process is considered a quick and simple process where the word threshold is not widely used in District A.
- Theme 2: Choosing to allow the natural and authentic campus data to be the leading guide creates funding allocation consistency in District A.
- Theme 3: The Title I coordinator's choice of the Title I qualifying cut point has a profound impact on all campuses' allocations in District B.
- Theme 4: Consistency from year to year is preferred but is difficult to achieve in District B.
- Theme 5: Redundancy of information is necessary within the annual Title I meeting.
- Theme 6: Similarities in the items and agendas discussed at the annual meeting.
- Theme 7: The need for ongoing support throughout the year.
- Theme 8: District size and diversity district affects efficiency.
- Theme 9: The timing of the annual Title I meeting affects campus planning and efficiency.

This research clearly demonstrated the advantages for Title I allocations that exist in a smaller district, such as District A, and need to be replicated in large school districts such as District B. Several implications for practice and recommendations for future study that originated from this study are made in Chapter 5.

Keywords: *Title I grants, economic disadvantage, middle school, secondary school, accountability*

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Chapter 1: Introduction to The Study

Funding inequities have always been present within school districts, especially in high poverty, high minority communities. These high poverty serving schools operate with less funding and offer fewer opportunities for their students who were also below the federal poverty level (Ujifusa, 2016). Today, approximately 16% of children living in America are below the federally designated poverty level, and most of these children represent minority ethnicities, such as African American and Hispanic American (Semega, Kollar, Creamer, & Mohanty, 2019). However, the poverty level has been much higher in recent years. For instance, during the Great Recession between 2009 and 2011, the poverty rate for children was as high as 41% (Edwards, 2014). Every state in the country experienced increasing child poverty (Ujifusa, 2016).

The federal government has worked to ensure educational equity to students since the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 during the Johnson administration (Bailey & Duquette, 2014). The primary intent of ESEA was to supply schools in disadvantaged communities with federal capital to provide their students with the essential resources to support a viable education. Title I was part of ESEA by providing funding to be used to address the achievement gap between children of poverty and all other children (Clotfelter, Ladd, Vigoro, & Wheeler, 2007). Clotfelter et al. (2007) noted that high-poverty schools and school districts served a population of students with a poverty rate of 75%. ESEA's introduction stated the following:

In recognition of the special educational needs of children of low-income families and the impact that concentrations of low-income families have on the ability of

local educational agencies to support adequate educational programs, the Congress hereby declares it to be the policy of the United States to provide financial assistance (as we set forth in the following parts of this title) to local educational agencies serving areas with concentrations of children from low-income families to expand and improve their educational programs by various means (including preschool programs) which contribute particularly to meeting the special educational needs of educationally deprived children. (p. 1)

Therefore, Title I of the ESEA Act of 1965 became one of the most significant programs created by the federal government to benefit elementary and secondary education, with roughly \$15- billion funds annually working their way into the classrooms of underprivileged students' classrooms (Gordon, 2016). Over time, Title I has been criticized for not being applied with effectiveness and not benefiting children of poverty as intended.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) replaced the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2002) on December 10, 2015. The NCLB era represented the most substantial incursion of the federal government into state-level public education regulations in American history. A unique requirement of NCLB was for all students, regardless of economic or disability status, to reach a prescribed level of academic proficiency in any district that accepted any federal funds for any reason (Brown, 2007). The ESSA continued funding from the federal government but returned the regulatory control for public schools to the states; however, there is uncertainty about Title I funding as public schools continue to adapt to ESSA (Skinner & Cooper, 2019; Ujifusa, 2017). In

this era where local education agencies have greater control over the use of Title I funds, principals may be demonstrating financial and programmatic creativity that they did not have under NCLB. Yang, Granja, and Koball (2017) of the National Center for Children in Poverty reported that nearly 12.8-million children in the United States, roughly 21% of all children in this country, reside in homes with incomes below the federal poverty level. Joseph Dalaker (2017) noted that the current level of poverty for a family of four is \$24,120. Regretfully, on average, most families need an income of about twice that level to cover necessary expenses such as rent, utilities, food, and transportation; therefore, about 43% of children live in low-income families (Yang et al., 2017).

Indeed, students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds present more challenges for schools to educate. For example, public schools must provide free or reduced lunch to ensure that children of poverty are fed and able to learn during the school day. Students from impoverished backgrounds tend to have academic challenges identified at higher rates than students from higher SES families (Morgan, Farkas, Hillemeier, & Maczuga, 2009). The school systems in low-SES communities often lack the necessary resources and fail to ensure that students achieve academic progress and positive outcomes (Aikens & Barbarin, 2008). Morgan et al. (2009) noted that children from low-SES households and communities develop on-grade academic skills slower than children from higher SES households and communities.

The SES-related achievement gap is pertinent in Texas, which ranks 41st out of the 50 states in child poverty (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2019). Additionally, 22.2% of Texas' students live in poverty (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2019). Another critical

distinction affecting the achievement gap relates to the ethnic population proportions between the nation and the state involves. The Kaiser Family Foundation (2020) reported the Texas population in 2018 as 41% White, 12% Black, 40% Hispanic, and 5% Asian and the national population in 2018 as 61% White, 12% Black, 18% Hispanic, and 6% Asian. Texas' Hispanic population nearly equals its White population. The White population of Texas is lower by 20% than the White population of the nation, and Texas displays more than double the representation of Hispanic families that the nation displays. Generally, most middle-class families tend to be White, and Hispanic families are more likely to be migrant and impoverished. The population numbers indicated a need for Texas to develop educational equity policies that district and campus-level personnel can use for creating a blueprint that causes equity in student success and the closure of the achievement gaps that are seen between middle class to affluent students and their peers who live in poverty. Such policies might be better designed based on data from the principals tasked with applying Title I funds in a school serving high populations of Black and Hispanic students who live in poverty.

Statement of the Problem

The socioeconomic gap that affects student achievement has been ongoing. In 1965, the ESEA began the Title I funding program to address the achievement gap caused by socioeconomic status (SES). This program has continued and expanded through the various reauthorizations of the ESEA. However, many American school students of economic disadvantage continue to struggle to attain acceptable academic achievement benchmarks. Unfortunately, many low-performing secondary schools

continue to need systemic improvement and redesign (Balfanz, DePaoli, Atwell, & Bridgeland, 2018). All of these low-performing secondary schools are overwhelmingly located in distressed neighborhoods and school districts concentrated in 18 states (Balfanz et al., 2018).

Thus, there are ongoing challenges to ensuring secondary academic excellence in school systems serving high concentrations of culturally diverse and economically disadvantaged students. The federal government's reaction to the problem has been to provide more money to these failing schools without the benefit of data and systemic overhauls. The logic that more financial inputs produce improvements to students' achievement outcomes seems unassailable, but a host of evidence suggests that increasing expenditures in general, and Title I funding in particular, has not improved the academic achievement of poor students (Matsudaira, Hosek, & Walsh, 2013). One postulation could be that information can be explored regarding how school districts determine Title I allocations to its campuses and its middle school principals use of Title I funds with success.

The importance of the low-performing high schools is related to the middle school students who feed into them. It is difficult for low performing high schools to improve when the students promoted into them came from low performing middle schools that did not prepare the students for the rigors of high school. The primary role of middle schools is to bridge the gap between elementary school grades with self-contained classrooms and high schools with complex master schedules (Santamaria & Santamaria, 2013). Middle

schools have been hailed as critical to the creation of positive learning environments for ensuring success among students of early adolescence (Abualrub & Algandi, 2012).

There are middle school campuses within districts that are indeed using Title I funds to create systems that cause students to be academically successful. The question likely needs to be asked about the decisions and systems that Title I coordinators have in place to make campus allocation determinations and the decisions of received Title I funding being made to meet schools' needs by principals who use Title I money successfully as well as unsuccessfully. Notably, research in the area of principal discretion in the use of Title I funding and regarding what programs or philosophies lead to the most effective use of these funds is minimal. Reeves (2018) called for more research on the use of Title I funds and decision making of allocations of those funds. C. Growt (personnel communication, February 2, 2016) described Title I fund usage as left entirely up to the campus principal with either minimal or no oversight or guidance from the district Title I coordinator or the federal government. Further research may allow for gaining an understanding of the campus-level decisions about Title I funds made by middle school principals of both successful and failing campuses. Therefore, it was relevant to probe into the decision-making of experienced campus principals of Title I middle schools in terms of their management of Title I budgets and the academic achievement of students from homes with economic disadvantage.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research was to conduct a comparative case study that illuminates the aspects of planning and decision making between two high performing

and two low performing middle schools serving similar student populations within two separate school districts. Each district was represented by two high performing and two low performing Title I middle schools. Decisions for campus expenditures of Title I funding rests almost solely with the campus principal, even though their training and professional development for budget development, management, and best practices in using Title I money is regarded as minimal or nonexistent (Reeves, 2018). Middle school settings were chosen as the focus of this exploratory study due the importance of the middle school experience in preparing secondary students for the rigors of high school (Santamaria & Santamaria, 2013).

The 90/90/90 designation by Reeves (2003) was used as a guide to find the population of schools. The 90/90/90 designation means at least 90% of students in a given school receive free or reduced-price lunch as a definition of poverty, at least 90% of students in the school are minorities; and at least 90% of students demonstrate adequate academic achievement in reading or mathematics as evidenced by state-mandated test scores (Reeves, 2003). In Texas, adequate academic achievement leads to a school rating of A, B, C, or D, and unacceptable achievement leads to a school rating of F. Once schools that meet the criteria are found, only the schools with principals who have led those schools for at least three full academic years were considered for interviews. Preliminary research led to an understanding and acceptance of how difficult it could be for a school meeting the first two criteria of Reeves' model to meet the last criteria of having an overall passing rate of 90% on a state assessment test. For that reason, two principals of adequately performing Title I middle schools with an

accountability grade of above a B or at least an overall passing rate of 80% passing rate on the STARR test and two principals of middle schools with a school grade of F were recruited for participation. Additionally, the Title I coordinators of the same districts in which the principals' schools were located were interviewed to learn their observations of the use of Title I funds by their middle school principals.

Research Questions

Maxwell (2013) insisted that the research questions form the foundation of the research design. They represent the component that most directly links all other elements of the study. The research questions were based upon the review of literature, which detailed the unintended consequences of the federal government's funding structures and the shortcomings of the application of Title I funds by campus principals. The research questions were framed in terms specific to the participants' settings to reduce inappropriate generalization and to respect the diversity within Title I middle schools (Maxwell, 2013). Four major research questions were developed as follows because they represent the domains of spending available to middle school principals throughout the fiscal and academic year:

1. What is the ongoing planning and decision-making process for the allocation, distribution, and utilization of Title I funds for the high-performing middle schools?
2. What is the ongoing planning and decision-making process for the allocation, distribution, and utilization of Title I funds for the low-performing middle schools?

3. What ongoing middle school planning and decision-making processes for the allocation, distribution, and utilization of Title I funds are shared between the low-performing and high-performing middle schools?
4. What differences exist in the ongoing planning and decision-making process for the allocation, distribution, and utilization of Title I funds between low-performing and high-performing middle schools?

Framework for Analysis

A process theory approach was used to gain a deeper understanding of how principals plan for the use of Title I money. Process theory tends to see the world in terms of people, situations, events, and processes that connect these; explanation is based on an analysis of how some situations and events influence outcomes (Maxwell, 2004). Maxwell (2004) provided a foundation for the rationale of this research in which the principals' use of Title I funds were explored.

Definitions of Terms

Specific terms are prominent in the education world and are applied throughout this project. This section defines the meaning of those terms.

Low SES Student. A student coming from a household categorized as low in the areas of income, education, and occupation of members of the household. A low SES student generally achieves as lower levels than do students from middle and high SES families. (Waddell, 2020).

Middle School. This school is configured as secondary and serving Grades 5 to 8 or Grades 6 to 8. For purposes of this research, only middle schools serving students in

Grades 6 through 8 were eligible for inclusion in this study (Texas Education Agency, 2020).

Principal. The person with the authority to oversee all daily school operations, including instructional leadership, curriculum development, personnel management, learning environment safety, and facilities maintenance and operations (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020).

Title I Coordinator. This district-level position is responsible for coordinating and managing the Title I and prekindergarten programs operating in the identified low-income schools to meet the needs of students from diversified backgrounds (Garland Independent School District [ISD], 2020).

Title I School. This public school receives the federal government's grant program funds for ensuring equity in educational opportunities for low-income students (U.S. Legal, 2020).

Campus Comparison Group. Each campus in Texas is assigned to a unique comparison group comprised of schools that are most similar to it. To determine the campus comparison group, each campus is identified by school type then grouped with 40 other campuses from anywhere in Texas that are most similar in grade levels served, size, the percentage of economically disadvantaged students, mobility rate, the percentage of English learners, the percentage of students served by special education, and the percentage of students enrolled in an early college high school program. Each campus has only one unique campus comparison group. There is no limit to the number of comparison groups of which a school may be a member. A school can be a member of

no comparison group other than its own or a member of several comparison groups (Texas Education Agency, 2019).

Improvement Required. The Texas Education Agency accountability system classifies campuses and districts as either met standard (MS) or improvement required (IR). Schools classified as IR have received an unacceptable performance rating (Donaldson, 2018).

High SES Student Population. The identification for students attending a school that has less than five percent of its student population receiving free and reduced lunch, according to the National School Lunch Program eligibility (Waddell, 2020).

Campus/School Improvement Plan. This term refers to the unique plan that defines targeted work needed to raise achievement for all students in an underperforming school and is refined annually (Texas Education Agency, 2020).

Socioeconomic Status. SES refers to the economically driven social standing or class of an individual or group; may be determined according to the combination of the individual's or group's education, income, and occupation; can represent resource inequity; and can show the effects of privilege, power, and control (American Psychological Association, 2020).

Basic Grants. This type of Title I grant provides funds to LEAs in which the number of children counted in the formula (formula children) is at least 10% and exceeds 2% of an LEA's school-age population (U.S. Department of Education, 2018b).

Concentration Grants. This type of Title I grant provides funds to LEAs that are eligible for Basic Grants and in which the number of formula children exceeds 6,500 or 15% of the LEA's total school-age population (U.S. Department of Education, 2018b).

Targeted Grants. This type of Title I grant is based on the same data used for Basic and Concentration Grants except that the data are weighted so that LEAs with higher numbers or higher percentages of children receive additional funds. Targeted Grants are based on the same data used for Basic and Concentration Grants except that the data are weighted so that LEAs with higher numbers or higher percentages of formula children receive additional funds. Targeted Grants provide funds to LEAs in which the number of formula children (without application of the formula weights) is at least 10 and at least 5% of the LEA's school-age population (U.S. Department of Education, 2018b).

Education Finance Incentive Grants (EFIG). This type of Title I grant provides funds to States based on measurements of the financial support provided by a state for education compared to the state's relative wealth according to per capita income and the degree to which a state ensures equalization in education expenditures among LEAs (U.S. Department of Education, 2018b).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

The study was delimited by selection criteria. The participants were the principals of Title I schools and their respective district-level Title I coordinators. The participant selection criteria involved finding two campuses with a minimum B rating that met the first two 90/90/90 criteria and two F-rated sites that met the first two criteria of the 90/90/90 standard. The 90/90/90 standard means at least 90% of students in a given

school receive free or reduced-price lunch as a definition of poverty, at least 90% of students in the school represent minorities; and at least 90% of students demonstrate adequate academic achievement in reading or mathematics as evidenced by state-mandated test scores (Reeves, 2003). Once schools that met the criteria were found, only the schools with principals who led those schools for at least three full academic years were considered for interviews. Additionally, the Title I coordinators represented the same districts as the principals' schools.

The limitations prevented the transferability or generalizability of the findings beyond the participants interviewed. The geographical size of the State of Texas made choosing campuses within the same campus comparison group nearly impossible since the state did not attempt to consider regional locations when determining the school comparison groups of 40; the nature of the state's comparison groups did not allow for the two districts represented in the study to be members of the same comparison group. The findings might not have transferability to schools beyond those in the districts participating in this study.

The trends and commonalities emerging between the principals and Title I coordinators might not transfer to other 90/90/90 Title I middle school campuses or their school districts. However, in qualitative research studying two campuses from both the top and bottom quartiles were represented as evidence about the effectiveness of interventions and funding decisions. Therefore, readers are encouraged to decide about the transferability of this study's findings to other school districts and middle schools.

Significance of the Study

Principals play a vital role in setting the direction for successful schools, but existing knowledge on the best ways to prepare and develop highly qualified principals was sparse (Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005). This study was designed to address what previous research had not addressed about the campus-level practices and decisions related to the use of Title I funds. By interviewing experienced district level middle school principals at four Title I campuses and their district-level Title I coordinator in the state of Texas, this qualitative study was conducted to determine what allocation patterns and common uses of Title I money were made by districts and middle school principals most often.

The findings served as a written resource for district-level leaders seeking to improve their outcomes when using Title I funds. This study yielded findings that could be used to form an action agenda for reform by superintendents desiring to ensure all schools, regardless of economic disadvantage levels, perform with academic excellence. For this reason, this qualitative study was intended to offer an action agenda for reform to improve the delivery of education to students attending Title I middle schools. Further, this study could provide an opportunity to educate professionals and researchers at both state and national educational conferences and to design professional development opportunities for principals who receive Title I grants at their schools. The middle school campus leaders who manage Title I funds might see evidence of best practices in raising achievement levels among all students that could be used for future policy decisions and

by superintendents seeking to promote high-achievement in schools with high percentages of economic disadvantage.

Summary and Organization of the Study

This chapter introduced the proposed study of how districts distributed funds to campuses and how middle school principals used Title I funds at the campus level. The problem was expressed as a need for research in the area of principal discretion in the use of Title I funding and regarding what programs or philosophies led to the most effective use of these funds because Reeves (2018) called for more research on the use of Title I funds and decision making of allocations of those funds. Chapter 2 contains a review of the literature, including the historical events that led to the government's decision to allocate funds to support schools that contained high concentrations of low-SES students, the level of difficulty associated with teaching kids of poverty, the funding issues that exist at the federal level, and how those decisions might cause the neediest campuses not to receive funds they were allocated. Chapter 3 describes the methods used in this study. It includes the sampling procedures and the analysis of the data. Chapter 4 provides a report on the data. Chapter 5 contains a summary of the results, a discussion of the results, and the recommendations.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

The literature review provides a synthesis of the most current research on Title I Part A distribution formulas and allocation patterns and identifies the deficiencies in the federal government's funding of high poverty schools. The patterns and unaddressed loopholes for Title I Part A in the funding formulas may reduce the effectiveness of the grant in high poverty states, districts, and campuses, even though Title I was designed to generate equity in educational delivery (Aud, 2007). A thorough search of the literature was conducted through the University of Texas at Austin's library.

The landscape of public education is continually evolving, and for this reason, peer-reviewed articles as recent as 2010 were preferred for evaluation in an attempt to add value and credibility to this review; however, exceptions were made for seven publications that were cited by other researchers as evidence for ongoing school finance concerns. During the research process, certain and specific authors began to emerge as leaders in specific areas due to the volume of articles that were referenced or cited in other researchers' articles. Authors such as Baker, Matsuidaira, Hanushek, Roza, Gordon, and Wong, are known leaders regarding Title I policy and its implementation.

Additionally, Massey and Denton's (1993) *American Apartheid*, Massey's (2007) *Categorically Unequal: The American Stratification System*, and Wilson's (2012) *The Truly Disadvantaged* provided a foundational understanding the of environments of schools operating in poverty-concentrated neighborhoods, and more importantly, the challenges to educational equity that exist within neighborhoods housing poor, minority children. The library database and Google scholar searching revealed 15 peer-reviewed

articles, 25 governmental and non-profit sources, 6 newspaper and magazine sources, and an expert interview with Dr. Jennifer Holme (2014) that could be used for this presentation that begins with an explanation of Title I.

Title I Funding

As noted earlier, Title I was part of the landmark ESEA (1965) legislation. Title I funding to public schools across the nation represented roughly \$15.8 billion in 2018 alone (Skinner & Cooper, 2019). The \$15.8 billion committed by the federal government would appear sizeable; however, it is spread across qualifying public schools as well as a growing number of charter schools in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. While Title I has five parts listed as Part A, Part B, Part C, Part D, and Part E, this discussion is focused explicitly on Title I Part A that addresses the improvement of the plans run by educational organizations and requires schools to provide professional development to teachers (Lewis, 2014). More importantly, Title I provides funds to supply additional teachers, pay staff to extend the school day, and expand parental involvement opportunities. The two types of improvement plans are entitled to get Title I grants are School-Wide and Targeted Assistance Plans (Edley & Cuèllar, 2013). Because Title I Part A's focus is broad, it represents the most substantial portion of funding allocated by grants to schools to have a significant impact on student performance (Edley & Cuèllar, 2013).

Part A of Title I provides for four separate grants designed to ensure educational equity among students who are economically deprived. The initial program is appropriately called the basic grant, and it began at the inception of the program in 1965

(Aud, 2007). Eligible children in each local education agency (LEA) are those aged between 5 and 17 years who come from families living in poverty (LEA; Aud, 2007).

Participating LEAs need at least 10 eligible children. Also, qualifying children should represent more than 2% of the students within the LEA to ensure the LEA is entitled to receive the basic grant (Aud, 2007). Due to the ease of meeting the qualifying criteria in this area, only 0.01% of schools in the United States fail to qualify for Title I Part A funding (Aud, 2007).

In 1978, concentration grants were added to Title I Part A. The concentration grants were designed to respond to the volume of struggling inner-city schools. Attending a high-poverty school can bring down the achievement of both low and middle-income students (Holme, 2014). For that reason, the eligible and target schools for concentration grants are primarily located in highly urbanized areas (Aud, 2007). The concentration grants were designed to combat poor academic achievement, the result of the consistently adverse effects of concentrated poverty and racial segregation (Holme, 2014). The concentration grants are granted to institutions that have at least 15% of the total student population or 6,500 students coming from families of poverty (U.S. Department of Education, 2018a). The concentration grants addressed the growing disparities of concentrated poverty and the educational issues associated with poverty found in the most densely populated low-income school zones. (Boschma & Brownstein, 2016).

The U.S. Congress commissioned a report to be used to inform the reauthorization of ESEA (Taylor & Piche, 1990). In the ESEA reauthorization, known as Improving America's School Act (IASA) of 1994, two new grants, the targeted grants and education

finance incentive grants, were added to the Title I Part A grant series based on Taylor and Piche's (1990) findings. Taylor and Piche had found a high correlation between performance and poverty. More specifically, students from poor districts or families were not performing well academically in school. The Title I Part A targeted grant mirrors the concentration grant by directing funds to areas with high concentrations of children living in poverty. The grant is given to an LEA on condition that it enrolls at least 10 eligible children, or at least 5% of the total population of students in the LEA are children of poverty (Aud, 2007).

Brown (2007) found that schools with 50% of students coming from families living below the federal poverty levels received 73% of Title I funds. The federal government subsequently appropriated additional funds for schools containing concentrations of students of poverty at rates over 75% and made it mandatory for LEAs to ensure any campus with a poverty rate of at least 75% receive allotments from Title I grants (Brown, 2007). The Improving America Schools Act of 1994 increased and expanded school participation in the Title I Part A grant program.

However, the ease with which LEAs can meet the target grant qualifying standard causes the allocations to be diluted among the LEAs campuses and creates a situation in which the campuses with qualifying students may not produce increases in student achievement among children of poverty (Wong & Meyer, 1998). There are several key issues regarding Title I Part A to consider.

Key Issues with Title I Part A

The reduction of the achievement gap was the primary goal and intent of ESEA in 1965. The law allowed for providing additional federal-level funding to schools in high poverty areas to ensure every child in any public school receives equitable opportunities for learning (Suitts, Barba, & Dunn, 2015). However, equity issues have persisted into the 21st century. The Title I program has been criticized because of the U.S. Department of Education's formulas and methods for allocating the funds. Before ultimately reaching the intended targets, which are schools with higher percentages of poor students, Title I funds flow through a bureaucratic maze from the federal level down to the school level. Despite Title I's almost \$15-billion contribution to schools per year (Cornman et al., 2020), state funding formulas with state-per-pupil expenditure (SPPE) rules have a more considerable influence over school funding than the Title I rules made by the federal government (Coley & Baker, 2013).

The Problem with State Per-Pupil Expenditure (SPPE)

The Basic Grant is dictated by multiplying the number of students who are eligible to receive the funds in the LEAs' state by a dollar sum representing 40% of the cost factor per student (Aud, 2007). The cost factor ought to fall between 32% and 48% of the SPPE national average (Aud, 2007). By ensuring that funds are allotted to each state in proportion to the SPPE, the grant further reinforces spending inequities between states. Not all states fund schools at the same levels; in fact, there is a wide disparity in school funding using the SPPE formula (Cornman et al., 2020). The use of median SPPE in federal reporting hides many of the nuances involved in the funding formulas.

The median SPPE in the United States for the fiscal year (FY) 2016 was \$10,789 (Cornman et al., 2020). However, the states that are situated in the southern regions are at a disadvantage under the SPPE formula because of their higher concentrations of poverty (Elser, Upton, & Gann, 2020) and lower levels of SPPE (Cornman et al., 2020). The SPPE factor gives little thought to the cost of living differences between states. The educational purchasing power varies from state to state in terms of dollars due to differences in the cost of living. For instance, a dollar in Massachusetts, a low-poverty state with high Title I aide per child, has less educational purchasing power than a dollar in Mississippi, a high-poverty state with low Title I aide per child (Liu, 2007). Consequently, Title I funding distributed without regard to the cost of living inequalities between states further advances educational inequalities.

For the state of Texas, the Texas Education Agency serves as the state education agency (SEA) responsible for regulating the distribution of state and federal funds allocated to various public school districts and charter schools. The federal education agency, the U.S. Department of Education, determines the SEAs' shares of the funds allocated by Congress through its specific formulas and includes each state's SPPE as part of its scheme.

For example, Texas was at a disadvantage in the receipt of Title I funds in the Basic Grant in 2017 because of its SPPE of \$9,375 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). That value fell below the nationwide SPPE average of \$12,201; therefore, the state appeared 41st out of the 50 states in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). This information is inclusive of the District of Columbia. To highlight the wide variance in

federal contributions that this formula creates, Vermont's SPPE was \$20,540, which was the highest. New York funded SPPE at \$19,697 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). Those states receive higher levels of Basic Grant funding. Meanwhile, Texas and states like Utah (which ranks last at \$7,635 SPPE) with SPPEs below \$10,000 receive less education funding for each student (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017).

In the 2019 Texas legislative session, House Bill 3 was passed and provided a little over a \$1,000 increase in the basic per-student allotment from the state by taking it from \$5,140 to \$6,160 for each Texas student. House Bill 3 added significant teacher raises averaging \$4,000 across the state, and the two together became primary drivers of SPPE calculations (Swaby, 2019). House Bill 3 also introduced the Teacher Incentive Allotment (TIA). One of the Texas Legislature's primary goals coming into the session was to elevate teacher salaries. Under TIA, schools are now tiered by their levels of poverty. The schools with the highest tiers had the level of need for more funding to recruit veteran, high-quality teachers by offering them significantly higher salaries. The TIA created a window of opportunity for high-poverty, Title I campuses to pay a teacher up to \$32,000 more than the teacher who prefers to remain at a campus with few students of poverty.

Sometimes, the state expenditure factor is rationalized in order to reward or provide incentives to states that are spending more on education. However, it is worth noting that rationalization is flawed for several reasons. The first reason is that the aid provided by Title I is minimal in comparison to overall school funding, and for this reason, many states are not motivated to spend additional state or local spending. For

instance, from 2003 to 2006, Mississippi increased its SPPE spending from \$7,610 to \$7,710 (Liu, 2007). Due to the increase in SPPE, Title I aid also increased proportionally. According to Liu (2007), Mississippi's Title I aid increased proportionally from \$170 million to \$173 million. As seen in the \$100 increase per student, the federal formula for sending Mississippi Title I aid led to a \$3-million increase for the state's school system. Additionally, Liu (2007) noted the \$3-million increase in Title I funds was less than 6% of the \$54 million that Mississippi allocated when increasing the education spending for each of the 541,000 students living in the state by a mere \$100 per student. Thus, many states might not have been motivated to spend more on education just to receive a small increase in Title I funds over the last several years.

The revenue for education within each state is directly related to the state's fiscal capacity to support education and a function of the state's willingness to leverage its fiscal capacity (Goodwin, 2008). However, the correlation between fiscal capacity and revenue is robust. Therefore, the state expenditure factor does not provide any incentive, nor does it adequately reward states for extra education funding. States that are wealthy and with low levels of child poverty exercise small efforts against their fiscal capacities as when compared to disadvantaged states (Goodwin, 2008).

Goodwin (2008) named states such as Connecticut, Maryland, and Massachusetts as exerting less effort against their fiscal capacities than poor states such as Arkansas, Oklahoma, and New Mexico. Despite this disparity, wealthy states continue to receive federal aid because wealthy states usually achieve higher per-pupil spending as when compared to their counterparts. Some states devote abundant resources, such as New

Jersey, while others devote limited resources. The issue created is wealthy states, such as Illinois, Pennsylvania, and New York, containing severe socioeconomic disparities, which tend to disfavor districts characterized by high levels of poverty. According to Camera (2018), the lowest-poverty districts spend \$1,000 to \$2,000 more per student than the highest-poverty districts can spend. Consequently, the idea of rewarding states that spend more on education funding seems very inappropriate for achieving equity.

The Small State Minimum

Apart from the SPPE, there are several other elements of Title I that contribute to the inequality in education funding across the states. The fact that many of the 50 states vary in size, demographics, and poverty levels forces federal officials to add a few oddities into the funding formula. One of those well-intended oddities is the small state minimum. The small state minimum was added to ensure that states with small populations and presumed to be mostly rural would receive additional federal funding (Gordon, 2016). Figure 1 provides an example of the disparity in funding the small state minimum creates. Vermont and Wyoming were recipients of the small state minimum funding due to their state's small, rural populations. However, the small state minimum was not applied in high-poverty, highly rural states like New Mexico and Mississippi that are not considered small (Gordon, 2016). The fundamental result is that states like Vermont and Wyoming allocate more money to each student than states such as Mississippi and Louisiana because the federal government attempts to ensure equity between states based on populations.

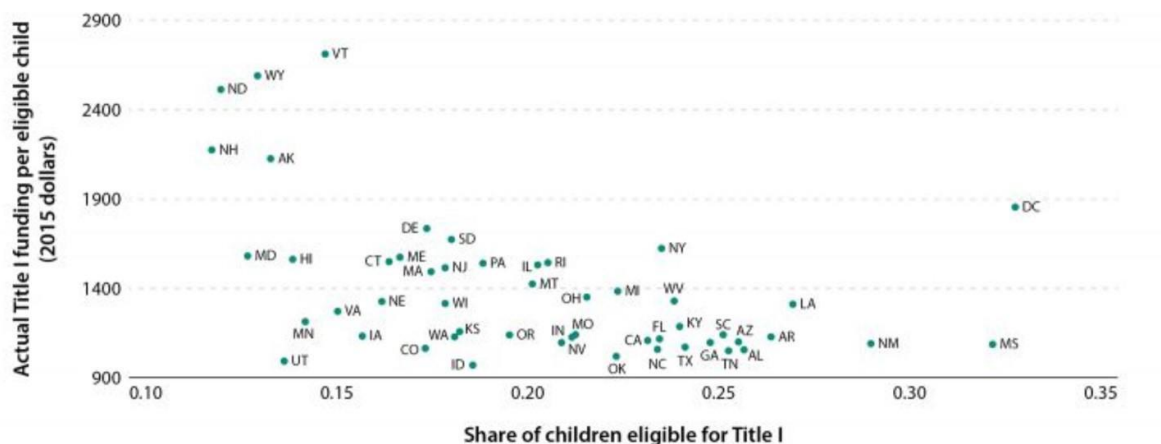


Figure 1. Small-state funding reprinted from Gordon (2016). From Increasing targeting, flexibility, and transparency in Title I of the ESEA (<https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Policy-Brief.pdf>).

Allocation Patterns of Title I Funds

Previous research on Title I distributions examined how states were complying with federal regulations. Numerous studies were done between 1977 and 1986 that focused on Title I funding allocations (Brown, 2007). More specifically, Brown (2007) assessed the findings provided in the studies about the percentage of Title I funds that reached the schools. Brown determined that funds had been distributed according to the funding rules properly but noted that 60% of eligible schools between 1977 and 1986 had not received any Title I funds. Brown expressed concern that even though Title I funding reached the high poverty, minority students most in need, more than 50% of high-poverty students with reading levels below the 50th percentile received no compensatory education services from Title I.

A primary factor is the new use of annual updates on the population of students living in low-income families who are enrolled in the districts. Before 1997, the Title I

formula was updated once every 10 years based on U.S. census reports (Lewis, 2014). However, due to annual updates by the U.S. Census Bureau, Title I funding formula adjustments began happening annually (Lewis, 2014). Through the use of data obtained from annual updates, funding could be aligned more accurately with where high- poverty students lived. Unfortunately, these numbers proved to be imperfect due to fluctuating significantly from year to year, which introduces volatility into the distribution of funds that did not exist when the same data were used for several years (Lewis, 2014). Depending on the annual changes in the number of eligible students, small districts, or ones with low populations, slip in and out of Title I eligibility (Lewis, 2014).

For some states, the formulas are more favorable. In the FY2015, each eligible student or child was entitled to benefit from Title I funding amounting to \$1,227 SPPE (Snyder & Dinkes, 2019). However, this allocation varied between states. According to Snyder and Dinkes (2019), Title I final allocations per formula-eligible children in FY2015 ranged from \$984 in Idaho to \$2,590 in Vermont and proportionally coincided with states' SPPE. For instance, California was estimated to receive the most substantial FY2016 Title I-A grant amount of \$1.8 billion, or 11.98%, of the total Title I-A grant (Skinner & Rosenstiel, 2017). Wyoming was estimated to receive the smallest FY2016 Title I-A grant amount at \$34.7 million, or 0.23%, of total Title I-A grants (Skinner & Rosenstiel, 2017). The way Title I funds favor higher SPPE states while lower SPPE states do not benefit is because the formula is driven by state spending on education (Miller & Brown, 2010). Consequently, states that spend more, such as the wealthy

states, gain more Title I funds. Thus, Title I-A grant amounts and the percentage shares of funds vary due to the different characteristics of each state.

For example, Texas had a much larger population of children included in the formula calculations than North Carolina and was estimated to receive a more significant grant amount and a larger share of the nation's Title I-A funds (Skinner & Rosenstiel, 2017). There is evidence of a long, embattled history of Title I in which federal and state administrators have disputed how best to institute the statutory funding formulas for achieving the goal of economic equity under realistic guidance about educational and financial needs (Skinner & Rosenstiel, 2017). Texas allocates less SPPE dollars but also has a large student population to educate. Hence, the state receives more dollars than Utah, which allows few SPPE dollars and has a smaller population of children to educate. Table 1 lists the top three highest state-level recipients of Title I appropriations. Table 2 lists the bottom three lowest state-level recipients of Title I allocations.

The actual Title I allocations that states receive are usually smaller than the values seen in publications (Biddle & Berlinger, 2002). This discrepancy happens because states tend to adjust the allotments due to several reasons, such as choosing to reflect LEA boundary changes or because of the creation of new LEAs. The states adjust their allocations because the two factors mentioned above are not accounted for in the statutory calculations (Biddle & Berlinger, 2002). Also, states are allowed to reserve a certain amount of their allocations for administrative purposes. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2018a), states can reserve up to 1% of their allocations. Further, states are allowed to reserve 7% of their allocations to improve the

schools. These adjustments tend to decrease the actual amounts available for LEAs and their schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2018a).

Table 1

Highest Three and Lowest Three State's Winning Title I-A Grants in Dollars (Rounded to Nearest Dollar Unit) with Percentage (Rounded to Tenths Place) Share of Funds for FY2016 as Adapted from Skinner and Rosenstiel (2017)

State	<u>Basic</u>		<u>Concentrated</u>		<u>Targeted</u>		<u>EFIG</u>		<u>Total</u>	
	Grant \$	% of Total	Grant \$	% of Total	Grant \$	% of Total	Grant \$	% of Total	Grant \$	% of Total
CA	764,578	12.0	166,083	12.3	445,796	12.7	391,518	11.2	1,767,975	12.0
TX	580,779	9.1	129,148	9.6	314,472	9.7	327,524	9.3	1,378,923	9.3
NY	477,209	7.5	100,698	7.5	308,824	8.8	254,659	7.3	1,141,389	7.7
NH	17,744	0.3	2,891	0.2	11,157	0.3	11,385	0.3	43,177	0.3
VT	14,354	0.2	2,541	0.2	9,136	0.3	9,217	0.3	35,249	0.2
WY	14,364	0.2	1,967	0.2	9,172	0.3	9,158	0.3	34,661	0.2

Comparability Expectation and the Title I Funding Dilemma

The comparability provision of Title I was added shortly after the creation of ESEA in 1970 to ensure that Title I funds were layered on top of schools in need after all state and local funds were distributed equally throughout an LEA (Ayscue & Fusarelli, 2019). The rationale was based on Title I not being designed to boost spending if school districts used the funds in place of primary spending in the high- poverty schools (Roza & Lake, 2015). On the surface, the comparability requirement is highly sensible. The long-term intent of federal lawmakers was to ensure that Title I children (and eligible schools) acquired better teachers, smaller classes, more instructional time, or

supplementary programs that were generally unavailable in the district as a whole; this way even high poverty children benefitted from the standard services provided to all other students in any LEA (Roza & Lake, 2015).

Unfortunately, the comparability provision has loopholes within it that have not allowed for the federal law's intent to take form. One big issue is that the threshold to meet requirements to be a Title I recipient school has always sat at 40% of the students in the school being eligible for free lunch (Carson, 2018). Large- to medium-sized districts, often with many schools easily rising above the 40% threshold to entitle them to receive Title I money, have been siphoning Title I dollars away from schools with at least 70% of the students in the school being eligible for free lunch (Carson, 2018). Some studies of LEA spending show that some of the very inequities that prompted comparability in the first place have continued happening in most large urban districts (Dynarski & Kainz, 2016; Roza, 2008).

Another prominent comparability loophole is the federal government allowing schools to use the average teacher salaries of the entire district for reporting actual salaries of teachers assigned to each campus. As a result, two schools in the same district are considered monetarily comparable even if the teacher salaries in one school are significantly higher than the other due to differences in teacher experience or certification (Dynarski & Kainz, 2016).

Inside virtually every large district studied by different researchers, it was discovered that, on average, teachers earn lower salaries by working in the schools with the highest percentages of poverty (Dynarski & Kainz, 2016; Roza, 2008). Because

teacher salary schedules are based on years of teaching experience and education credentials, the difference in salaries between an inexperienced and experienced teacher within the same district is usually substantial. For example, in some of Texas' urban school districts, the difference is quite visible, and Table 2 presents evidence of this discrepancy between just four urban districts in Texas. Houston pays about 10% more to a new teacher than does Waco. Houston pays teachers more than the other three districts. Notably, El Paso is located on the international border with Mexico, where the poverty levels are even higher than they are in Houston or Waco. Austin, the state capital, actually pays teachers less than El Paso pays teachers.

Table 2

Teacher Salary Differentials in Texas for 2017-2018 in the Austin, El Paso, Houston, and Waco Independent School Districts (ISD)

Experience (Years)	Austin	El Paso	Houston	Waco
0	\$50,251	\$50,556	\$54,369	\$49,000
15 with Masters	\$53,899	\$57,693	\$60,341	\$56,600
30 with Masters	\$63,937	\$65,704	\$72,109	\$62,300
Average Across of Years and Degrees	\$57,579	\$60,754	\$68,286	\$58,267

Note. Data adapted from the Texas Education Agency's performance reporting system found at <https://tea.texas.gov/texas-schools/accountability/academic-accountability/performance-reporting/texas-performance-reporting-system>

Instead of allocating an exact aggregate dollar amount to each school within a district of teachers' salaries, the four districts above and many other large districts develop a single average salary and multiply that single value times the number of

assigned teachers on that campus when developing a budget for staffing and more importantly demonstrating that they are meeting the comparability expectation. In other words, schools in the same district with the same number of teachers will report the same amount of money spent in terms of teachers' salaries even when there are severe differences in their actual salaries between schools. The use of the average district salary instead of using actual labor costs by a school is one of the reasons why funding is not equitable before the distribution of Title I funds (Rivera Rodas, 2019).

School districts instituting this practice overlook the reality that teachers earn their salaries based on the number of years of experience they have in the profession and the degrees or specialized certifications that they have obtained. For example, the 2019-2020 base salary for a first-year teacher in an Austin Independent School District (2020) school with a bachelor's degree was \$50,251. A 15-year veteran with a master's degree was entitled to almost \$4,000 more than a first-year teacher. In accounting for spending on teacher salaries across schools within the district, Austin's average teacher salary was \$52,536.

The practice of reporting teacher salaries as an average across districts consistently works against Title I schools. District leaders might incorrectly assume that the years of experience of teachers are spread equitably in a uniform distribution across all the schools within their district. One of the biggest problems that schools in poor districts face is a shortage of qualified teachers (Morgan, 2012). Most teachers who teach in poor schools are likely to hold less educational credentials, teach a subject they do not specialize in, and graduate from less prestigious universities when compared with

teachers who teach in more advantaged areas (Morgan, 2012). It has been acknowledged that the highest needs schools in a district continue to have the most difficulty with recruiting teachers and are quite frequently staffed with lower-paid teachers (Rivera Rodas, 2019; Roza, 2008). New and lower-paid teachers most often end up in high-need, high-poverty schools that pay teachers significantly less than schools also staffed by teachers with extensive experience and graduate degrees (Haycock & Hanushek, 2010). Since experienced and higher degreed teachers are not distributed evenly across districts, the result is that qualified teachers are not distributed quitably across districts. This problem has been ongoing for Title I schools because veteran teachers often transfer to schools with better funding within the same school district (Rivera Rodas, 2019).

A comparison of two middle schools within Austin ISD provides evidence of the teacher staffing disparities (Table 3). Gorzycki Middle School in Austin ISD is regarded as one of Austin's ISD's finest middle schools with an accountability rating of A. Meanwhile, Mendez middle school is firmly entrenched as a Title I school with nearly 91% of students eligible for free and reduced lunch status and an accountability rating of F. Mendez has also been regarded as one of Austin ISD's most troubled middle school campuses for several consecutive years.

Notably, Mendez had half the percentage of teachers with master's degrees that Gorzycki had. In an interesting shift of data, 56.2% of Gorzycki's teachers have 6 or more years of teaching experience. In comparison, a nearly equal percentage of teachers (56.5%) at Mendez had less than 5 years of teaching experience. The data from two middle schools in the same district support the findings of the literature.

Table 3

Comparing Teacher Staffing Information for one Non-Title I Qualifying and one Title I Qualifying Middle School in Austin ISD, Texas

Characteristic	Gorzycki	Mendez
School Accountability Rating	A	F
Economically Disadvantaged Percentage*	5.5%	90.6%
Staff with at least a Master's Degree	24.0%	13.0%
Beginning Staff	8.7%	24.1%
Years of Experience		
1-5	11.3%	56.5%
6-10	20.9%	8.9%
11-20	27.3%	8.5%
Over 20	8.0%	2.9%
Average	10.7	3.9

Note. * indicates the threshold for Title I eligibility is 40%. Data adapted from the Texas Education Agency's performance reporting system found at <https://tea.texas.gov/texas-schools/accountability/academic-accountability/performance-reporting/texas-performance-reporting-system>

Gagnon and Mattingly (2012) discussed the effect of concentrating novice teachers on one campus at a rate of 17% or higher as a critical value leading to disparities in students' academic achievement. The average teacher salary value reported by AISD makes no distinction between the novice teacher and the veteran teacher and does not represent school disparities such as those seen in Table 3 regarding the preferences of veteran teachers and the limited choices of novice teachers. Mendez Middle School met the critical disadvantage threshold discussed by Gagnon and Mattingly to leave this school at a disadvantage. The well-known fact that teacher salaries comprise around 80%

of school spending (Cavanaugh, 2017) further places Title I campuses, such as Mendez, at a disadvantage.

In the national survey findings by Dynarski and Kainz (2015), Title I spending represented a mere 5% of funds above what would have been normally spent on each child (Dynarski & Kainz, 2015). Realistically, disbursing 5% extra may not be enough to close the performance gaps that currently exist between students by ethnicity, language spoken in the home, and socioeconomic status or between students of the two middle schools just discussed. Dynarski and Kainz also demonstrated when a teacher makes approximately \$50 an hour, the added 5% allocation of Title I money, each year, purchases approximately 10 additional work hours for a teacher. However, that 10 hours is quite small compared to the approximately 1,080 instructional hours a teacher produces annually. Thus, one can conclude that the ways districts report data to meet the comparability expectation allow for hiding inequity between schools and suggests that comparability reporting decisions become one of the leading contributors to why Mendez Middle School has been a low-performing campus for many years.

Title I authors, early on, recognized this problem in school funding and wrote language in 1970 to eliminate this problem (Roza, 2008). The law contains the following:

(1A) local educational agency may receive funds under this part only of the State and local funds will be used in schools served under this part to provide services that, taken as a whole are at least comparable to services in schools that are not receiving funds under this part.

(2B) DETERMINATIONS—For the purpose of this subsection, in the determination of expenditures per pupil from the State and local funds, or instructional salaries per pupil from State and local funds, staff salary differentials for years of employment shall not be included in such determinations. (20 U.S.C. § 6321 - U.S. Code)

Even though, as Rivera Rodas (2019) reported, the Part 1A language was clear and precise in creating a framework to address situations of inequity, such as using teacher average salaries, Part 2A created the loophole for districts to exploit. By sparing districts from reporting staff salary differences based on years' experience, Part 2A supported the practices enable in teacher inequity between Title I and non-Title I. The statute specified how districts could comply, and in doing so, created a host of inequities that work against academically struggling Title I campuses (Rivera Rodas, 2019). It was not the definition of comparability that failed, but rather the language of compliance. Overall, the loose language of the comparability section of Title I and the exploitation of this loophole allows for the disparities in teacher quality at the school level between Title I and non-Title I schools. Exposure to high-quality teachers can provide significant long-term advantages to academic success and future earning potential of students (Chetty, Friedman, & Rockoff, 2012). Excellent teachers motivate children, encourage independent learning, have high expectations for achievement, and help children who are having difficulty (Strain, 2007). High poverty students have less access to effective teachers, which contributes to sizeable achievement gaps (Chetty et al., 2012). Title I funding regulations, at the very least, need to be revised.

The Significance of Title I Principals

There are shortcomings of funding schools filled with students from low SES using the U.S. Department of Education funds. The funds arrive as a supplement to the campus budgets in September, and the principal has the final decision for how and when these funds will be spent. For this reason, districts focus on principal effectiveness with empirical evidence regarding whether principals create school environments conducive to teaching and learning (Clotfelter, Ladd, Vigoro, & Wheeler, 2007; Seashore-Lewis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom & Anderson, 2010).

The impact of school leadership is recognized as second only to teaching regarding school influences on student success (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Further, the impact of leadership is most considerable in schools with the greatest needs (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2009; Leithwood et al., 2004). Manna (2015), argued that despite growing recognition of the principal's impact on a school's and its students' outcomes, policymakers tend to overlook the needs for supporting the specific role: "The principal's role has received consistently less attention relative to other topics [and] policymakers give much more attention to teachers and teacher-related issues than principals."

NCLB was replaced by ESSA in 2015, and ESSA allowed for an expanded potential role that SEAs can take in supporting principal preparation and development. ESSA's Title I aligned to the recommendation made by Manna (2015) for the role of the principal to be treated separately and distinctly from the role of the teacher. A clear example of this alignment is the new ESSA provision that allows states to set aside up to

3% of the funds otherwise reserved for LEA sub-grants to be allocated for activities supporting principals and other school leaders (Manna, 2015). While the overall purpose of Title I remains the same between NCLB and ESSA (i.e., preparing, training, and recruiting high-quality teachers, principals, and other school leaders), the level of specificity and inclusion of research-based strategies explicitly aimed at principals set ESSA's regulations apart. ESSA was developed based on data from over a decade of practice and research on effective principal preparation and development strategies.

ESSA guided states and districts seeking to improve principal quality. Refinements under ESSA to the Title I state-level funding formula included: (a) increasing the percentage of funds SEAs could use to support teacher and principal effectiveness from 2.5% to 5%, and (b) allowing SEAs to reserve up to an additional 3% of federal funds for specifically targeting the development and support of principals (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

The changes at the federal level still have not led to increases in the professional development opportunities for campus principals. However, most of the nation's principals do not have access to professional learning that reflects what they need for managing a school's Title I budget in addition to their local budgets. Current principals are often ill-equipped to lead schools in the areas of changing demographics, large-scale reform initiatives, changing technology, and evolving instructional strategies. Improving principals' professional development is going to require a new way of thinking, prioritizing, and budgeting at the state and local levels now that ESSA is supporting this initiative with a strong financial commitment.

Conclusions

Even as Title I funding distributions approach \$16 billion, Title I processes have caused political and educational leaders to question the actual return on the program. Overall, Title I programs do not appear to provide significant funding help to states, and high-poverty schools improve the gap in performance between students of different economic backgrounds. Schools characterized by high populations of students from disadvantaged families continue to receive less funding than non-Title I, low-poverty schools. Title I funds are not distributed equally, and the funding gap is caused by disparities in local funding (Kabaker, 2009). Title I regulations do not provide states with the incentives that are needed to ensure that they provide disadvantaged and minority students equitable access to an excellent education (Robinson, 2018). The literature suggested that the allocation patterns of Title I funding depends on various factors such as geographic location, state population, state demographics, and state funding. Title I funding weaknesses appear to result from the language and formulas utilized for allocating the funds from the federal government to the SEA, from the SEA to the LEA, and within the LEA between its schools (Matsudaira et al., 2013). These issues suggest a need for exploring school principals' experiences with executing Title I grant policies on their school campuses.

The volume of prior research on the effectiveness of campus principals does appear to be abundant; however, there are no known studies exploring the financial decision-making of principals in the use of their Title I budgets with the execution of school improvement plans on academic outcomes of students. A study is needed to

directly explore both the district policies and processes for allocation of Title I funds and the use of Title I money in conjunction with school improvement plans. The following chapter contains a description of the methods used in this study, as well as the sampling criteria, data collection procedures, and the analysis of the data.

Chapter 3: Methods

The chapter describes the methods and design used to conduct this qualitative study of a comparative case study. It includes the research method and design, the population and sample studied, the instruments for data collection, and the procedures for collecting data and data analysis. The purpose of the study was to conduct a comparative case study that illuminates the aspects of planning and decision making between two high performing and two low performing middle schools serving similar student populations within two school districts. District level campus allocations are made by the district Title I coordinator and decisions for campus expenditures of Title I funding rests almost solely with the campus principal, yet training and professional development for budget development, management, and best practices in using Title I money is usually minimal or nonexistent (Reeves, 2018). By interviewing principals of Title I middle schools, the principals' experiences and decisions could be used to understand the effect of Title I funds on student achievement.

The four major research questions followed from the purpose and formed the foundation of the research design that was basic qualitative to explore the phenomenon (Maxwell, 2013). The research questions were framed in terms specific to the participants' settings to reduce inappropriate generalization and to respect the diversity within Title I middle schools (Maxwell, 2013). Four major research questions also represented the domains of spending available to middle school principals throughout the fiscal and academic year:

1. What is the ongoing planning and decision-making process for the allocation, distribution, and utilization of Title I funds for the high-performing middle schools?
2. What is the ongoing planning and decision-making process for the allocation, distribution, and utilization of Title I funds for the low-performing middle schools?
3. What ongoing middle school planning and decision-making processes for the allocation, distribution, and utilization of Title I funds are shared between the low-performing and high-performing middle schools?
4. What differences exist in the ongoing planning and decision-making process for the allocation, distribution, and utilization of Title I funds between low-performing and high-performing middle schools?

Research Design

The design was a basic comparative case study to allow for exploring the experiences of principals using Title I funds at middle schools that were meeting the state's academic standards with an accountability grade of at least a B and middle schools that were not meeting the state's academic standards with an accountability grade of F. Qualitative researchers gather information by talking directly with the people operating within the phenomenon of interest to understand how they act within their contexts or natural settings. In the natural setting, the researchers conduct face-to-face interaction by talking directly with people unencumbered by what might be found in the literature and empower participants to tell their stories (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Maxwell, 2013). The

comparative case study design allowed for understanding nuances in funding allocation decisions made by principals and Title I coordinators for high and low performing middle schools and between two different school districts.

Description of the Population, Setting, and Sample

The participants were the principals of Title I schools and their respective district-level Title I coordinator. The participant selection criteria involved finding two middle school campuses meeting the 90/90/90 criteria with an accountability rating of at least a B and two middle schools that met the first two criteria of the 90/90/90 standard but did not earn an accountability rating of D or better. Reeves (2003) defined high-performing high-poverty schools as 90/90/90 when at least 90% of students in the school receive free or reduced-price lunch, representing a definition of poverty; at least 90% of students are minorities, meaning African-American, Hispanic/Latino, etc.; and at least 90% of students demonstrating academic achievement in reading or mathematics or both on state-mandated assessments.

The researcher sought a minimum of two B-rated or above sites that almost met the 90/90/90 criteria of and two F-rated sites that met the first two criteria of the 90/90/90 standard. Interviews were conducted in early September with two district-level Title I coordinators and four middle school principals. Additionally, the current accountability system of the Texas Education Agency (2019) applied comparison groups of schools.

Each group contained 40 comparable schools that were demographically similar. To determine the campus comparison group, each campus was identified by school type then grouped with 40 other campuses from anywhere in Texas that were most similar in

grade levels served, size, the percentage of economically disadvantaged students, mobility rate, percentage of English learners, percentage of students served by special education, and percentage of students enrolled in an early college high school program. Each campus was part of only one unique 40-campus comparison group (Texas Education Agency, 2019); however, no single 40-school comparison group contained schools representing the needed characteristics.

This research involved targeting middle school principals and their Title I coordinators within a specific criteria of high or low performing Title I middle schools. Two principals of two middle school campuses representing high performing on the A to F accountability system and principals of two campuses representing low performing with a grade of F were asked to participate in interviews. The researcher had to mine the Texas Education Agency (2019) accountability data to find districts with campuses whose principals met the inclusion criteria. Because campuses with improvement required ratings were likely to have more annual turnover at the principal position, the selection criteria involved finding principals who held their role for at least three academic years and remained in their role for the academic year in which interviews were conducted. Experienced principals who led their schools for at least three years were assumed to possess the knowledge about the use of Title I funds that was being explored in this study. Exploring the comparative experiences of the four principals' use of Title I funds was expected to be enlightening.

Instrumentation

The data collected came from semi-structured interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher asked about middle school budgets and expenditures as well as student achievement. Mertler and Charles (2008) reasoned that open-ended questions allow for more individualized responses since respondents are not limited in their selection of options. These questions were both broad and targeted to allow participants to share their constructed meanings about their experiences. Gall, Gall, and Borg (2003) noted that open-ended questions allow respondents to make any response that they wish, similar to an essay question. The researcher developed an interview question guide for enabling principals to reveal the information that led to answering the research questions. The researcher followed an unstructured interview format for the Title I coordinators and interviewed them following all four principals' interviews in order to develop topics to cover with them based on the initial codes found in the principals' data.

The principal interview guide was designed to support the research questions and the uses of Title I funding as follows: (a) personnel, (b) systems, (c) technology, and (d) special programs. Some vital elements of asking questions for each of the research questions were about understanding whom the principals involved in their decision making processes, how and where they gathered research and data for informing their decisions, and what supports they received and needed from their central offices. The principal interview guide appears in Appendix A.

ESSA required LEAs in receipt of Title I funding to develop and implement an evidence-based comprehensive support and improvement plan to improve student

outcomes (Ross, 2018). This expectation created an opportunity for the researcher to thoroughly review and compare of each selected campus' school improvement plan. The researcher looked for evidence of an initial needs assessment, data-driven decision making, and feasible goals and benchmarks, among other elements. More importantly the researcher examined the school improvement plans alongside the reality of campus expenditures.

Researcher Positionality

Motivation drove the researcher in this study! A particularly important advantage of qualitative research involves using one's experience as motivation (Maxwell, 2013). Researchers have a personal history that situates them as inquirers and an orientation to research and a sense of personal ethics and political stances that inform their research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

This researcher was proud to have overcome a childhood of poverty and growing up in a single-parent household in project housing. The researcher's single-parent mom, however, made very few mistakes in her decision-making and steered the researcher to an elementary school across town that was deemed inaccessible by all other project-housing neighbors and playmates. The researcher could tell from an early age that the choice his mother made for was a crucial difference-maker in his academic success. He noticed, as early as the first grade, that he knew more things than his neighborhood playmates and that they often used verbs that were incorrect in their speech and play conversations.

As a high school student, postsecondary graduate, and public-school educator, the researcher often recalled the environment at the elementary school he attended. The

consistency of high expectations for each student in the building from everyone within the school, regardless of race and economic capacity, made an impression of the researcher. The key separator from any other kid living in a large project housing complex for the researcher was the level of involvement of his mother and the high expectations he received from both her and the school he attended.

The researcher himself was proof that a solid education makes a difference. For this reason, the researcher chose to focus his professional career exclusively, and this research opportunity, on low-performing Title I schools. The researcher always yearned to work in the most adverse environments in an attempt to reverse the life trajectories of students who resembled him.

Along the way, the researcher learned the value of empowering all students to complete higher-level academics. The researcher purposely participated and led professional development opportunities that advocate for the participation of low-SES and minority students in the higher-level academic programs. His work in this area, increasing participation along with performance in AP classes, led to the College Board naming him 1 of 13 College Board Fellows nationally in 2015.

The researcher had been a principal at two Title I middle school campuses and one Title I high school campus. The researcher's experience at the middle principalship led to an interest in exploring the leadership of the middle school grade levels. The researcher was currently a superintendent in a Title I school district. In all instances, the researcher took the leadership role in these places to make things much better before leaving for the next challenge. The Title I environment, and in most cases, the adversity,

dysfunction, and hopelessness that often exist within it, was what the researcher would consider his calling. The researcher was interested in exploring the techniques and strategies used by Title I middle school principals to enhance the entire profession.

The researcher successfully led two TEA-monitor assigned middle school campuses from the brink of closure to meeting both federal and state accountability standards. Beyond that, the decisions and practices for the use of Title I funds played a vital role in the swift improvement of those campuses and led to their districts adopting the programs and standards. For that reason, the researcher guarded against having tunnel vision and bias against decisions that differed from the past. The researcher was careful not to project his professional journey with Title I fund use onto the data provided by the participants.

The researcher realized how his personal bias could influence the findings of a study of campus leaders' activities and decisions. Researchers interpret what they find, an interpretation shaped by their own experiences and background. The researcher's intent, then, was to make sense of the meanings others have about the world (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Nevertheless, the personal strength the researcher had in this area could represent his biggest weakness. When the research questions, selection of settings and participants, data collection, and analysis are driven by personal desires without careful assessment of the potential impact of the latter on the conclusions, a flawed or biased study could emerge (Maxwell, 2013).

The need to recognize the participants' worldviews and realities from behind their lenses could create confusion if the researcher projected his own experiences onto the

data. Acknowledgment of this problem formed a way of correcting it. An additional way to overcome the bias was to keep a journal of personal reflections about the data and the researcher's position to the study. Further, the researcher bracketed his personal opinions and views about the research to maintain an objective focus on the data during data analysis. The researcher anticipated not being comfortable as an investigator and bracketed those affective issues to meet the primary goals set for this study.

Data Collection and Procedures

After approval from the committee, the researcher applied for and received IRB approval as an exempt study (Appendix B) to study human subjects. The researcher conducted a pilot test interview with a principal who was not part of the target population of Title I middle school principals to check the validity and adequacy of the questions being asked and to practice the interview process. The interview questions were described in the instrumentation section.

The researcher was not studying specific school districts but the experiences of people who had leadership roles over the Title I funding in middle schools. The data were primarily oral histories of experiences with regular educational practices and did not represent any risk to the participants, whose confidentiality was protected. The researcher obtained consent from the participants to use the information collected during their interviews. First, the researcher made contact by telephone or email and used the same script or content in either case that involved detailing the purpose of the study and the methods for ensuring the participants' confidentiality. All data were masked in the final study with pseudonyms. The districts were District A and District B. The first district was

District A, and the corresponding participants were Principal 1A, Principal 2A, and Coordinator 1A. The second district was District B with the corresponding participants as Principal 1B, Principal 2B, and Coordinator 1B. Second, the researcher obtained consent to participate and to be audio recorded from the participants. Third, the researcher set up a 60-minute interview with each participant as the primary data source.

The first set of interviews included four middle school principals. The second set of interviews were directed toward the principals' respective district-level Title I coordinators. If the researcher needed to ask follow-up questions after the interviews, the researcher made contact with the participants to ask those questions. Each principal participant was asked the interview questions developed from the research questions. The researcher also kept a field journal to document any other findings while studying the principal and other members.

Trustworthiness

Triangulation was the key to this study since making use of multiple and different sources, methods, and documents provide corroborating evidence. When qualitative researchers locate evidence to document a code or theme in different sources of data, they are triangulating information and providing validity to their findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher looked for every possible opportunity to triangulate data. The semistructured interviews with principals were one source for triangulation. The unstructured interviews with the Title I coordinators was a second source for triangulation. A third source of triangulation was the examination and comparison of

each campus' school improvement plan. The researcher's use of a reflection journal represented another source for triangulation.

A pilot test process for conducting the interview ensured the questions were understood as valid and adequate. The questions asked during interviews were developed by the researcher and based on the research questions in this study. The pilot test allowed for gaining feedback from the pilot-test person who was not a middle school principal but was a Title I fund expert with experience as a principal at a school that used Title I funds.

Due to the researcher's prior experience in this area, it was critical to clarify researcher bias from the onset of this study. Any personal biases that existed could have impacted the inquiry and were acknowledged before the researcher began collecting data. It was critical and relevant for the researcher to state or comment on past experiences, biases, and prejudices that could affect or shape the interpretation of the collected data. These issues were discussed in the researcher positionality section.

The researcher focused on generating a thick, rich description of the data so that readers could make decisions regarding the transferability of the finding to their settings (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher described in detail the participants and settings for ensuring the likelihood of transferability. Not all campus leadership, structures, and organizations are alike, so a detailed description provided the reader with the ability to transfer information and results to their settings as they make a note of any shared characteristics.

The data were checked for accuracy while conducting the qualitative study. A professional password-secured transcription service known as Rev.com was used to

ensure the reliability of the transcriptions of the recordings. The professional service reduced the likelihood of mistakes in the text of the data. Careful analysis took place when coding, by continually reviewing data in iterations to generate codes. Assessments of data codes were made so that there would be no shifts in the meanings found in the patterns and trends during the process. The researcher also incorporated strategies for triangulating between the data sources to build a coherent justification for themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data Analysis

The very first step in data analysis is a description of the researcher's personal experiences with the phenomenon under study. Moustakas (1994) insisted that it is an excellent attempt at setting any personal biases the researcher may have aside so that the focus can be directly and exclusively on the participants in the study. The researcher thoroughly acknowledged his personal experiences with school leadership and the use of Title I funds. This acknowledgment might add strength to this study.

Once the data were collected, the researcher engaged in the iterative process of coding that involved disaggregating the text into small categories of information, seeking evidence for each code from the different data sources being used in a study, and assigning a label to the code (Maxwell, 2013). Kite, Whitley, and Kraus (2018) urged researchers to make preliminary counts of data codes and determine how frequently codes appear in their datasets. Open coding allowed the researcher to maintain an open mind about the data and see the data from the participants' perspectives before seeking out specific labels and codes that might be expected. The researcher developed a list of

significant statements. Each of these statements were treated as having equal worth, and the researcher worked to develop a list of nonrepeating statements. The trending statements were classified into codes and categories.

A description of what the participants in the study experienced with the phenomenon was developed. Maxwell (2013) referred to this activity as a textural description of the experience. The textual descriptions include verbatim examples and representations of how experiences happened. Maxwell referred to this activity as a structural description so that the research is reflective of the setting in which the phenomenon is experienced. In this research, thorough descriptions of the Title I schools' landscape, structures, and systems were explained.

Finally, the description of the phenomenon included both the textual and structural descriptions. Maxwell (2013) noted that the essence of the studied experience needs to be conveyed in the findings. The researcher expected these paragraphs to be lengthy for informing the reader of what the principals experienced with the phenomenon.

Summary

This chapter provided an outline of the research methodology used in this qualitative study. The overall goal of the research was to answer the four research questions and explore how the principals used Title I money in middle schools to support student learning. Chapter 4 provides the findings used to answer the research questions. Chapter 5 contains a summary of the results, a discussion of the results, and the recommendations for research and practice.

Chapter 4: Findings

Chapter 3 described the methods and procedures used to identify the ongoing planning and decision-making process by educational leaders at the district and campus level. The purpose of this research was to conduct a comparative case study for illuminating the aspects of planning and decision making between two high performing and two low performing middle schools serving similar student populations within two separate school districts. Two districts were represented by the participants in this study. One district had two high performing middle school campuses within it and the other district had two F-rated middle school campuses within it. Decisions for campus expenditures of Title I funding rests almost solely with campus principals, even though their training and professional development for budget development, management, and best practices in using Title I money is regarded as minimal or nonexistent (Reeves, 2018). Middle school settings were chosen as the focus of this exploratory study due the importance of the middle school experience in preparing secondary students for the rigors of high school (Santamaria & Santamaria, 2013).

For answering the research questions, the researcher collected data from semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom with both districts' Title I coordinators and middle school principals and from artifacts that included both districts' and all four campus' improvement plans. The researcher engaged in reflective journaling for developing the thick, rich descriptions. However, the four campus principals who crafted their federally required Campus Improvement Plans and determined the most appropriate uses of federal Title I money provided the majority of the data.

This chapter presents the findings for answering the research questions. The following four major research questions were answered for understanding the allocations of the Title I funds available to middle school principals throughout the fiscal and academic year:

1. What is the ongoing planning and decision-making process for the allocation, distribution, and utilization of Title I funds for the high-performing middle schools?
2. What is the ongoing planning and decision-making process for the allocation, distribution, and utilization of Title I funds for the low-performing middle schools?
3. What ongoing middle school planning and decision-making processes for the allocation, distribution, and utilization of Title I funds are shared between the low-performing and high-performing middle schools?
4. What differences exist in the ongoing planning and decision-making process for the allocation, distribution, and utilization of Title I funds between low-performing and high-performing middle schools?

Thick, rich descriptions were useful for this qualitative study because they allowed for assumptions regarding transferability (Creswell, 2007). “It goes beyond the basic facts, feelings, observations, and occurrences, to include inferences into the meaning of present data” (Hays and Singh, 2012). The researcher captured the meaning of the participants’ messages through thick, rich descriptions but also developed a list of prefigured, or a priori, codes prior to interviewing each of the

participants. Parent a priori codes, or major codes are listed on the left-hand side of the table. The parent codes provided a generalization for the interview protocol and assisted the researcher in the development of the questions asked. Child a priori codes, or sub codes, are listed on the right-hand side of the table. The child codes provided specificity to the parent codes and allowed the researcher to uncover driving factors leading to the overarching themes. Table 4 lists the priori parent and child codes that guided this study.

Table 4

Parent and Child a Priori Codes

Research Question	A Priori Codes
1 (District Improvement Plan)	Quarterly Checks District-Campus Goal Alignment
2 (Campus Improvement Plan)	Quarterly Checks District-Campus Goal Alignment
3 (compare/contrast 1 & 2)	Academics Student Needs Teachers & Campus Needs Calendar of Events Allocations Outcomes
4 (Title I Coordinator)	Professional Development Staff Programs Technology Allocation to Campuses

Settings and Participants

The settings included the following: (a) two highly impoverished middle schools in Texas with an overall Texas accountability academic rating of an F, and (b) two highly

impoverished middle school campuses with a minimum academic rating of at least an overall B rating. There was an abundance of high-poverty middle schools with an F rating to choose from for this study. The abundance of F rated high poverty middle school campuses provided further rationale for the significance of this study and heightened the overall need for further research.

The researcher settled on two campuses within an 80,000 plus school district in Texas that had an overall district rating of a B yet had 8 of 19 Title I middle schools earning D or F ratings. To find two high-poverty yet high-achieving middle schools in Texas was challenging, but a mid-size district of 11,000 students with a total of three middle schools was located for participation. The selection criteria required the principals to have a minimum of 3 years of experience in their current positions, as experienced leaders were assumed to be more capable of providing the rich descriptions of Title I processes.

The smaller district of 11,000 students was District A, and the corresponding participants were Principal 1A of Campus A1, Principal 2A of Campus A2, and Coordinator 1A. The larger district of 80,000 was District B with the corresponding participants as Principal 1B of Campus B1, Principal 2B and Campus B2, and Coordinator 1B. Campus A1 had an overall A-rating at 92 whereas Campus A2 earned an 85 or B rating. Campus B1 and Campus B2 had earned F ratings with scores of 50 and 52, respectively. Each district and its principals are summarized in Table 5 and described in the following paragraphs.

Table 5

Characteristics of the Four Campus Settings

Campus	Principal Tenure in Years	Rating (Score)	Middle School <i>n</i>	Economic Disadvantage %	Special Education %	English Learner %
A1	8	A (91)	835	82.6	12.8	13.3
A2	4	B (86)	788	88.8	13.8	20.3
B1	3	F (50)	616	95.6	20.9	56.2
B2	7	F (52)	661	96.4	16.2	68.1

District A Description

District A served a student population of over 10,000 students and operated over 10 campuses with three of those campuses designated as middle schools serving Grades 6 to 8. All three middle schools had at least an overall B rating. The district itself carried an overall district rating of A. This district was comprised of mostly economically disadvantaged Hispanic students. The Hispanic population represented 96.5% of the total school district population with 79.1% of the students labeled as economically disadvantaged.

The two middle school principals who participated had more than 3 years of experience at their current campuses, high percentages of economically disadvantaged students, and more importantly the overall high achieving academic rating. Campus A1 had the most experienced principal of the sample. This campus had the highest percentage of economically disadvantaged students in the district at 88.8%. Campus A2 had an economically disadvantaged student percentage of 82.6%.

However, District A did not have a person officially designated as a Title I coordinator. The district, instead, had two individuals performing the duties of Title I coordinator. Both administrators had over 20 years of experience. They were collectively responsible for bilingual education, special education, health services, policies, grievances, and discretionary grants. The coordinator who participated in an interview was primarily responsible for the district's allocation of Title I money to the campuses as well as the legal application of campus expenditures of Title I money.

District B Description

District B served a student population larger than 75,000 students and operated about 100 campuses with fewer than 20 middle schools and fewer than 10 middle school campuses carrying either overall D or F ratings. The district itself carried an overall district rating of B. The Hispanic population represented 55.3% of the total student population, and percentage of economically disadvantaged students in the district was 53%.

The two middle school campuses within District B chosen for this study had received F ratings and had high degrees of poverty, but the principals had many years of experience in their role. Campus B1 was led by a principal in her third year on the campus and in the district; however, this principal had 26 years of tenure in public school education. Campus B1 had a history of poor academic ratings including improvement required, low performing, or F rated for 12 consecutive years. The campus consisted of 95.6% predominantly economically disadvantaged children. Specifically, the campus consists of 90.7% Hispanic students. Campus B1 was designated as eligible for Senate

Bill 1882. Senate Bill 1882 provides incentives for districts to contract to partner with an open-enrollment charter school, institutions of higher education, non-profits, or government entities. Campus B1 was taken over by a charter in 2018 and was being managed by the Texas Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (T-STEM) coalition at the time of the principal's interview.

Campus B2 also had a high percentage of economically disadvantaged students at 96.4% as well as an ongoing failing rating from the Texas Education Agency. This campus was also predominantly Hispanic student serving at 90.2%. In 2007, Campus B2 was one of only five schools in Texas that had failed the state standards for 3 consecutive years. Campus B2 was led by a 7-year stalwart principal referred to as Principal 2B.

District B had a designated Title I coordinator in the 45th year of tenure as a public school educator. At the time of the interview, the District B Title I coordinator was in the 16th year of service as the district's Title I coordinator. This participant oversaw an office of five staff members, managed all applications for the Title I grant programs, worked with district-level leadership to allocate funding referred to as "rank and serve," and supported the principals with professional development and guidance about the legal applications of Title I money.

Findings

Emergent codes were identified during the coding process that evolved as the data were analyzed. These emergent codes were identified as the researcher searched for uniformities in the data through constant comparison. Constant comparison occurs when previously collected data are constantly compared to current data to develop additional

emergent concepts or themes (Hays & Singh, 2012). Figure 2 demonstrates the emergent codes that evolved during the data analysis process. This word cloud was also used by the researcher to identify the dominant themes that would answer the research questions.



Figure 2. Word cloud of most used terms during interviews.

The emerging codes were condensed into categories that could be used for evaluating the priorities and processes used by the district leaders and middle school principals for allocating Title I funds at the campus level. The key words were prioritized based on occurrences and grouped according to their functions within the data to guide the researcher in understanding the emerging themes as indicated in Table 6.

Table 6

Emerging Categories Related to Funding Decisions Based on Keywords

Categories	Key Words
District Level	System Monitoring
	Campus Improvement Plan
	District Plan
	Campus Level
	District Oversight
	Consistency and Alignment
	Fidelity
	Title I Coordinator Support
	Professional Development
Allocations Criteria	75% threshold
	Rank and serve
	Funding formula
	Natural and authentic
	Data Driven decisions
	Carryover
	Consistency and Stability
Timelines	July Spending Time
	September Spending Time
	Redundancy
	Agenda Similarities
	Supplemental vs Supplanting
	Ongoing Support
	Carryover

Research Question 1 Findings Regarding District A

The Title I coordinator in any district has several critical roles throughout the process of managing the Title I program. One those critical roles is the distribution of

Title I funds to campuses. The federal government relatively gives a wide discretion to the individual districts in this process. One of the key questions of this research was determining and evaluating the ongoing planning and decision-making process for the allocation, distribution, and utilization of Title I funds for the high performing middle schools. There were two themes that emerged when evaluating the interviews of both the principals and Title I coordinators of District A when discussing this question:

Theme 1: The allocation process is considered a quick and simple process where the word threshold is not widely used in District A

Theme 2: Choosing to allow the natural and authentic campus data to be the leading guide creates funding allocation consistency in District A

Theme 1: The allocation process is considered a quick and simple process where the word threshold is not widely used or discussed. The District A Title I coordinator expressed operating with a “much different, less complex,” and consistent funding process as follows:

In this particular midsize district all of the campuses here are Title I qualifiers with the lowest campus being at 63% economically disadvantaged, and this is a district choice we make. In other words, we let the campus demographics determine our Title I threshold. Our current qualifying threshold is at 63% because that is the lowest economically disadvantaged campus in our district. My district has consistently spread \$1 million to all the campuses in the district each

year so there is no need to determine a qualifying standard that would exclude any campus here.

The Title I coordinator of District A described the level of involvement of other district level stakeholders and the campus principals when making the allocation decisions:

We have never felt the need to have a meeting to discuss this. The district academic advisory council (DAAC) has long decided that they want all of our campuses to receive this funding so that takes any discussion away in that area. As for as how much the campuses get funded, we take all the district assigned support salaries out of the funding equation and that leaves the district to distribute the rest according to each campus' economically disadvantaged percentage. What is there to discuss when the data speaks so clearly to what we need to do? The key here is to be as predictable here as we can be. With predictability and consistency, our principals are always in a position to plan long term if they need to.

Campuses A1 and A2 were middle school campuses located in District A, and each principal was aware of not only each other's allocation amounts but also of the amounts received by all the other campuses. They both believed the district process was fair but admitted they would like to have more money. Principal A1 said:

My campus receives the largest share in the district because being a secondary campus; I have more students than the all the elementary campuses, and I have the third highest economically disadvantaged status in the district and the highest

at the secondary level at almost 89%. This system favors me better than the other campuses so I cannot complain. We all want more money for our campuses, but I cannot complain too much since I am getting the largest piece of the pie in the entire district from year to year.

Principal A2 added:

I do not think this is something that is up for discussion. We have never talked about the allocation amount. We come to our annual meeting in July and we get our allocations for the year and I do not see anything that significantly changes about it and we move on to the next order of business.

Theme 2: Choosing to allow the natural and authentic campus data to be the leading guide creates funding allocation consistency in District A. District A's method of making data driven decisions to determine Title I allocations to campuses naturally led to annual consistencies in campus funding. Campus demographics had mild and subtle fluctuations over time. With funding decisions being made based on demographics, funding also only had mild fluctuations from year to year as well.

Principal A1 and A2 discussed their actual Title I campus allocations and the degree of change from year to year. Principal A1 noted:

I do not have to worry about being a qualifier of the funds as my campus consists of 89% poor kids. I only have to worry about how much different it is from year to year. The most I have seen cut from this area is around \$5,000, and that does hurt, but that will not stop me from planning what I had already planned. There are some years where it is actually few thousand dollars more than what it was

from the past year so I think it sort of evens out over time. The consistency of it being around or close to the \$125,000 makes it easy for me to long-range plan.

Principal A2 stated almost the same information:

The amount of Title money that we get hardly ever changes. I am not too sure of how they do it, but I am in the same area each year, and I have developed a pattern of just paying for the same things with it each year since I already know generally what the amount will be.

District A never moves the Title I percentage of economic disadvantage students threshold, which benefits campuses receiving Title I funds from year to year as it is a standard practice to fund all of the campuses with excess Title I funds based on the individual volume of economically disadvantaged students at each particular campus. The only varying factor for the individual campuses in District A is the amount of economically disadvantaged kids attending each particular school each year which that variation from year to year has had minimal effects on overall campus allocations each year. The District A “rank and serve” allocation process was the same each year and the Title I Coordinator A did not remember the last time another campus changed in the rankings of what schools would receive the most or least in Title I allocations.

For this reason, District A’s process was favorable to the principals seeking predictable budgets because the campuses could consistently depend on receiving Title I funds annually, and perhaps even more advantageous, the principals could estimate and make plans for their Title I allocations far in advance of the school year. This practice created a significantly more stable funding environment for District A than District B. No

campuses in District A moved in and out of qualifying status for Title I funds and the funding amounts were consistent from year to year, which supported long-range planning.

Research Question 2 Findings Regarding District B

The Title I coordinator in any district has several critical roles throughout the process of managing the Title I program. One those critical roles is the distribution of Title I funds to campuses. The federal government allows for a wide range of discretion at the individual districts receiving Title I monies. One of the key questions of this research was determining and evaluating the ongoing planning and decision-making process for the allocation, distribution, and utilization of Title I funds for the low performing middle schools. There were two themes that emerged when evaluating the interviews of both the principals and Title I coordinators of District B when discussing this question:

Theme 3: The Title I coordinator's choice of the Title I qualifying cut point has a profound impact on all campuses' allocations in District B

Theme 4: Consistency from year to year is preferred but is difficult to achieve in District B

Theme 3: The Title I coordinator's choice of the Title I qualifying cut point has a profound impact on all campuses' allocations in District B. Title I coordinator for District B had 45 years in the field of education as a teacher, assistant principal, principal, gifted and talented coordinator, and as Title I coordinator for the last 16 years has seen plenty and confirms this with:

The only restriction I have when deciding which campuses to fund and how much funding they will get is the Feds have predetermined that any campus at or with more than a 75% economic disadvantage enrollment must be included in the district allocation funding decision. What that means is that I have to build a formula for the entire district that includes any campus with that degree of poverty. We (District B) have made decisions differently every year. This particular year we looked at our population and we looked at our budget and we looked at our needs assessment and then we decided to move our qualifying point to 70% instead of the Fed's 75% requirement for the secondary level that would qualify schools to receive the funds. We took that qualifying standard even lower for all of our elementary campuses and placed that number at 60%. So we develop a table and with that table, it has a threshold. And then we just start putting in numbers to suggest the per pupil rate so that we are meeting all of the threshold. We call this process rank and serve.

Regarding the process of adjusting the qualifying threshold percentage for schools in District B, the Title I coordinator said:

It does affect them because, secondary campuses are always going to override elementary schools because they have so many more students ... In short, the lower we take the qualifying threshold the lower amount of total Title I allocations any and all campuses will receive because you are cutting that pie thinner and thinner and there is only one pie. I do remember one year when we set the floor for qualifying campuses at a 40% economically disadvantaged

threshold. We likely will not ever see that again because we learned that taking it down that far really diminished the campus allocations to almost nothing in this district. The amount of money that almost every campus got that year just was not enough to make a difference.

Principal B2 was at his campus the year the cut point or threshold was set at 40% and expressed his thoughts regarding that decision.

I do remember when we did that and all the principals that easily qualify for Title I money from year to year were really surprised when we got our budgets for the year. My campus lost a little over \$100K. I really should have known something was different from the onset as there were so many more principals in that room that day than what it usually is. We all asked in the Title I meeting what happened and when this process was explained to us it was then that we realized how important that threshold number is. My campus is over 95% poor, and I felt like we needed the money way more than some of the campuses that were at 40% and 50% (economic disadvantage); did yet they took that number all the way down to help them out? It just did not feel very fair, and several principals gave the district a very hard time about it. It was a very poor decision in my opinion. Because of that year, I always ask what is this year's threshold just out of curiosity because it changes every year.

Principal B1 had less experience as a principal and did not know of the existence of the minimum 75% threshold standard for Title I and was not a member of District B when the 40% threshold decision was made. Regarding the district decision years ago to

take the qualifying standard from 75% to 40% and its overall impact, Principal B1 remarked:

I am glad that I was not here when that was decided. The adjustments to my plan after learning that so close to the start of the school year would be like living in a nightmare to me. That would make it so difficult to long term plan. They must have learned their lesson from that as I have not seen very much monetary swings in my overall Title I budget since I have been here.

Theme 2: Consistency from year to year is preferred but is difficult to achieve in District B. In discussing how a district gets to a specific threshold that is best for the district as a whole, Title I coordinator of District B explained:

We run about 50 different scenarios, and we look at the outcome, and in many cases, the greatest needs schools that will have the greatest cuts. And so, if you cut a school a \$100K in 1 year, you have done very little to help the overall academic success. So, we play many scenarios, and then we narrow it down to, maybe, three that have the least amount of cutting. And then, we present that to the cabinet and let them discuss the pros and cons. We also will take this before a group of principals and then we come up with the best-case scenario. What we are really looking for a scenario that is consistent with what most campuses have gotten in prior years yet with so many qualifying campuses I cannot build a model that will provide a consistent outcome for every campus in the district. Some school or schools in the district are going to be negatively impacted.

The Title I coordinator added:

There are times where my recommendation has constraints on one campus that will greatly affect other campuses. An example of this is some schools do not want the stigma of being recipients of Title I funds so we will draw our threshold based solely on that campus. With more than 100 campuses, that threshold will affect another campus that is fine and needs the Title I funding, yet they walk away with nothing because of the desires of the learning community of another campus can be louder than other campuses.

Principal B2 was one of the principals who met with Title I coordinator of District B to discuss the different models and described this process:

We have not taken the threshold lower than 40% since then, and that is probably because the coordinator added more principals to this group for preliminary input, and there are some of us who remember that. This is when I started serving on this. The process is simple yet the decision we have to make is difficult because we are going to eventually choose a model that is going to hurt a few campuses. In the process, we have a paper that has the last 3 years of Title I allocations of (District B) campuses, and we look for thresholds that are consistent with the recent historical allocations that a campus has received. There are 15 principals chosen for this, and with the proposed change of a threshold, we are looking at what each of our campus projections are first and then some of the other campuses that we are familiar with. What we end up settling on is the least disruptive model for the most minimal amount of campuses. It is not a perfect

system, and it never will be because the varying campus demographics and needs of each campus are so different.

Finally, the Title I coordinator of District B addressed other factors that impact the campus allocation process and results:

We do not get as much money as we used to get from the feds and the reason behind that is that (the city) is getting richer so it is driving our Title I money down which lessens the overall impact that it could have on our campuses. In 2012, our economically disadvantaged percentage was at 63%, and today we are at 53%.

Table 7 clarifies this information for triangulation purposes.

Table 7

Title I Allocations for District B and Economically Disadvantaged Percentage

School Year	Allocation	% Students of Economic Disadvantage
2018-2019	\$20,972,539	53.5
2019-2020	\$20,691,905	53.4
2020-2021	\$20,441,542	53.2

Note. Data adapted from the Texas Education Agency's performance reporting system found at <https://tea.texas.gov/texas-schools/accountability/academic-accountability/performance-reporting/texas-performance-reporting-system>

Research Question 3 Findings for Shared Processes Between Districts A and B for the Allocation, Distribution, and Utilization of Title I Funds in Middle Schools

Federal education grant funds or Title I money's primary purpose was to help

ensure that federal grant funds are expended to benefit the intended population defined in the authorizing statute, rather than being diverted to cover expenses that the LEA would have paid out of other funds in the event that federal funds were not available (Texas Education Agency, 2019). The provision was designed for the federal government to ensure that the level of state and local support for a program would remain at least constant with federal funds in place. District-level compliance in this area is one of the primary purposes of the Title I coordinators. The shared themes related to both districts' Title I coordinators using the mandatory, introductory annual meeting with campus principals to review the expectations and limitations of using Title I funds. The themes generated for this question related directly to this annual Title I meeting held in each school district as follows:

Theme 5: The need for redundancy of information within the annual Title I meeting

Theme 6: The similarities of items and agendas discussed at the annual meeting

Theme 7: The need for ongoing support throughout the year

Theme 1: The need for redundancy of information within the annual Title I meeting. Both districts' Title I coordinators stated that conducting an initial annual meeting is a federal requirement and that the federal government mandates a discussion on federal compliance of spending federal funds. The Title I coordinator of District B stated:

There were no changes to the federal rules and guidelines with the start of President Bush's NCLB and President Obama's ESSA educational packages for federal spending, yet we are required to review the spending rules and regulations of the grant with our principals from year to year.

The Title I coordinator of District A added:

The information that I am sharing is not anything earth shattering new for my principals. We have very little turnover in this district so the principals here really already know the rules and know them well. For that reason, I am not as thorough as I need to be because they already know it. I skim a lot of this for that reason.

The data from both districts' coordinators were supported by Principal A1's statement as follows

We really spend very little time going over the rules. I mean we already do a good job with compliance in that area. We spend most of our time on goal development for our campus improvement plans instead of going over Title I compliance.

And Principal A2 noted: "I feel that our coordinator trusts us in this area by now and for this reason we do not have to spend too much of our time on this and we can focus on the real work instead."

The two principals in District B both shared that they had the same experiences in their annual meetings. Principal B1 demonstrated:

It really is the same old PowerPoints every year. They could at least change the background on it. This year will be my eighth meeting of this kind, and I am not

expecting anything to be told to me that I do not already know and that I have not already heard.

Principal B2 echoed the sentiment, “I have sat through three of those meetings so far yet I did not catch on the first time that I had heard all of this before but I did the third time.”

Theme 2: The similarities of items and agendas discussed at the annual meeting. Both districts’ Title I coordinators referred to the annual meeting agenda as not only a review of the required Title I rules and regulations but also a discussion of their districts’ goals. The coordinators all said that district goals are discussed for ensuring consistency and alignment among the schools in the district. District B provided the annual meeting at beginning of the year in September as well as quarterly update meetings during the school year with all Title I schools’ principals. District B Title I coordinator explained:

During this meeting I go over compliance requirements, deadlines, district goals etc. I also use this time to have principals share what’s working for them so that they can exchange ideas for their campus improvement plans. After the meeting at the beginning of the school year, I conduct quarterly meetings with all the principals. I generate the agenda for those meetings by noting what are the most frequently asked questions that my office is getting from principals.

District A provided training for its principals at the beginning of the academic year. The agenda and content of the annual meeting is the same as District B. However, District A’s meeting is during the summer in July, and District A offers no quarterly

update meetings throughout the year. The District A's Title I coordinator provided the following details:

The district has a weeklong summer administration camp here where 1 full day is given to me to provide everything that principals need to know about Title I, and we take an entire day to provide principals professional development and try to anticipate areas where principals need support in the management of their Title I funds. There is more focus in these meetings on their campus goals and them completing their campus improvement plans. This is easy for us since all of our campuses are designated as Title I. We like it this way as that one meeting during the summer coincides with the peak planning period to talk about all the Title I regulations and updates. We do not have any quarterly updates during the year, but I support the principals if they need it. Whatever I deem important for them to know, I feel they should know it at the onset of the school year.

Theme 3: The need for ongoing support throughout the year. The Title I coordinator position created by districts primarily exists to provide oversight and campus support in the management and implementation of the federally funded grants. The districts' Title I coordinators accomplish the task by having the required, annual meeting early each year and scheduling the quarterly meetings to progress monitor campus spending.

The Title I coordinator of District B explained how the quarterly meetings that she scheduled provided further support for her principals:

I have my big meeting in September for all the campus principals, and then, we go ahead and calendar the quarterly meetings for them to add to them to their calendars for the remainder of the year. My main purpose of the quarterly meetings is to give them an opportunity to discuss their concerns and frustrations, and this is also a time that I can share some of the creative ways of spending that I may see from campuses within the district. I do this because I have some principals who are really good at managing their budgets and finding creative ways to frame the wording of what you want to spend Title I money on that makes it allowable. Not all of the principals are on the same level and this is good way to grow people.

Principal B1 seemed to value the quarterly meetings in District B the most by stating:

I get more out of the quarterly meetings than the big kickoff meeting in September because at that September meeting I am still dealing with starting the year up. I wish this was held in August instead. One of the main things that I like from the quarterly meetings is each of us gets a progress check of where we need to be with our spending and so that lets me know if I am doing a good job of spending all of this money that I am responsible for. I also like the ideas that we gain from the other principals as well. I feel that these meetings well support my needs.

Principal B2 held the quarterly meetings in high regard but also embraced them differently:

I do feel the support from our Title I coordinator throughout the year and I guess those meetings that we have sometimes during the year is her way of providing the support. I have so much money to spend and her arranging those meetings and getting everyone in the same room to toss out spending ideas is good for me. She also is good about answering my questions throughout the year. I love the fact that she seems to be always available for me despite how big this district is.

The Title I coordinator of District A interestingly did not see there being benefit to having quarterly meetings with its principals because of conducting campus visits with principals as follows:

The lack of turnover and overall stability here has really played a role in my approach to the principals. We used to schedule quarterly meetings, but I started to see them being less and less beneficial for us. They actually know the grant requirements and restriction really well and they do a great job of spending their money. They don't have that much in Title I money to begin with, and their campus improvement plan planning is really good. I make campus visits during the year with each principal and they often call me and ask me questions about what they are wanting to spend money on. I hope they would say that they feel supported, as I am always prompt about responding to emails or answering their calls.

Principal A1 remarked the following about the Title I coordinator's level of support:

We will never know the ins and outs of Title I like our coordinator, but he does a

great job of teaching and supporting us, and for that reason I have learned so much. Our coordinator ... will quickly tell us that we cannot spend federal funds on something that we want to plan.

Principal A2 experienced the same level of support from the District A Title I coordinator: “We all feel good about our level of support from our coordinator, and it was a good move to replace those quarterly meetings a while back with individual campus support.”

Research Question 4 Findings for Differences in Processes Between Districts A and B for the Allocation, Distribution, and Utilization of Title I Funds in Middle Schools

For this comparative case study, the Title I coordinator of the high-performing District A was asked the same set of questions as the Title I coordinator for District B in order compare the differences between the ongoing planning and decision-making process for the allocation, distribution, and utilization of Title I funds between the high- and low-performing middle schools. The interviews completed led to two themes:

Theme 8: District size and diversity district affects efficiency

Theme 9: The timing of the annual Title I meeting affects planning and efficiency

Theme 1: District size and diversity district affects efficiency. The choice of the two districts ultimately selected for this study was determining by finding middle school campuses that met certain criteria. The four campuses selected coincidentally represented two middle schools in a mid-size district and two middle schools in a large district. The differences in the planning and decision-making processes that emerged

between the two districts and the pairs of schools could be triangulated with the differences in the overall sizes of the two districts. Those differences show up in the allocation processes as the differences and diversities of the various campuses led to long, drawn out processes in District B of adjusting the thresholds for allocating Title I funds from year to year. The District B coordinator stated:

There are times where my recommendation has constraints on one campus that will greatly affect other campuses....With more than 100 campuses that cut-point will affect another campus that is fine with and needs the Title I funding yet they walk away with nothing because of the desires of the learning community of another campus can be louder than other campuses.

For the smaller sized District A, the similarities and lack of overall diversity in this district's schools enabled the district-level leaders to make generalized decisions about all campuses in a uniform manner. The Title I coordinator of District A specified:

In this particular midsize district, all of the campuses are Title I qualifiers with the lowest campus being at 63% economically disadvantaged, and this is a district choice we make... The district academic advisory council (DAAC) has long decided that they want all of our campuses to receive this funding. It makes sense for them to make that demand when our campuses look so much alike and have the same type of students.

A key expectation and requirement for all entities receiving Title I funds is the creation of either a campus or district improvement plan. The similarities and differences of the planning and decision-making process between the two districts and the high- and

low-performing middle school campuses were of interest. The alignment of district goals to the goals that appeared in a campus improvement plan represented a challenge in the larger District B whose overarching district goals were not always appropriately fitting between its diversely comprised campuses that had differing demographics and needs. Interestingly, District B's District Improvement Plan was referred to as the Strategic Plan. District B's website contained a Strategic Alignment section that held the following statements:

Strategic Plan Alignments To achieve implementation of the district's strategic plan, the administration will ensure that the following demonstrate alignments to the strategic plan:

- *Annual Campus Improvement Plans (CIPs)*
- Budgetary Requests and Annual District Budget
- Employee Performance Evaluations
- Departmental Plans and Other Plans of the District
- Agendas of the Board of Trustees and District Advisory Committees

Additionally, District B displayed 11 district goals that were referred to as “commitments” by the district as follows.

- Achieve excellence by delivering a high-quality education to every student
- Implement the transformative use of technology

- Ensure all students perform at or above grade level in math and reading
- Prepare all students to graduate on time.
- Develop civically-engaged students.
- Create a positive organizational culture that values customer service and every employee
- Develop effective organizational structures
- Generate, leverage, and utilize all resources
- Engage authentically with students, parents/guardians, teachers, and community
- Build ownership in District B among internal and external stakeholders
- Develop and maintain community partnerships

Campus B2's campus improvement plans consisted of 26 pages but also appeared to be incomplete; the status of the campus improvement plan's structure suggested a lack of monitoring and oversight occurred at the district level. The language in Campus B2's plan was inconsistent as the district's "commitment" terminology was replaced by the campus-level "lever" terminology. The district itself used the term "strategic plan" while the campuses used the traditional term of "campus improvement plan." The levers represented goals; however, they lacked specificity, measurement points, achievable tangibles, realism, and targets, which would cause them to be more difficult to monitor. Campus B2 provided two levers that did not align to the district's five strategic points in

its campus improvement plan. The two levers were to provide “strong leadership” and planning and to ensure “high-quality curriculum and effective instruction.”

Campus B1 provided a 43-page campus improvement plan that showed slightly more alignment to the district’s strategic plan. The Campus B1 plan contained five levers that aligned to three goals in the district’s strategic plan. This consistency of alignment was validated by the District B Title I coordinator stressing the district goals with principals at annual Title I meeting each September. Although Campus B1’s campus improvement plan provided evidence of alignment to the district’s strategic plan the levers were worded differently than the word choices included in the District B goal statements. Campus B1’s goals were the following:

Lever 1: Strong School Leadership and Planning Lever 2: Effective, Well-Supported Teachers Lever 3: Positive School Culture
Lever 4 & 5: High-Quality Curriculum and Effective Instruction

District A’s alignment of improvement plans between the middle school campuses and the district demonstrated being more closely linked. The Title I coordinator of District A also stressed the significance and importance of the consistency and alignment between the district and its campuses. The District A improvement plan had a total of 10 goals. The two District A middle school campuses displayed the same 10 goals as the district. Both middle schools used the same wording as the district’s published goals in their campus improvement plans. The goals were interchangeable between the two campuses and the district. The vertically aligned and worded goals were the following:

1. Maintain a safe, orderly and friendly school environment for all students, parents, and employees.
2. Academic programs will take the learning experience beyond state and federal standards in an effort to provide college and career readiness for all students.
3. Provide professional learning opportunities that allow staff to achieve a higher level of proficiency.
4. Build and maintain facilities that are conducive to an effective learning environment.
5. Maintain a comprehensive technology plan for meeting student achievement and improving operational efficiency.
6. Increase awareness and provide instructional programs that lead to college and career readiness.
7. Initiatives will increase student attendance as well as state and federal completion rates.
8. Maintain and promote parental and community involvement programs that enable all stakeholders to positively impact lifelong learning.
9. Maintain efficient and effective fiscal management of resources and operations to maximize the learning potential for all students.
10. Maintain a coordinated health program that promotes health and fitness for students and staff.

The alignment was unmistakable. The Title I coordinator of District A concluded as follows:

We have learned that our district has the same needs seemingly from campus to campus, and for that reason the district has taken the forefront to write district goals that are overarching for all of its campuses. We allow the campuses to individualize themselves in their planning towards meeting those goals.

Theme 2: The timing of the annual Title I meeting affects planning and efficiency. Another key difference the District Title I coordinators shared was their timing for a major annual Title I meeting. As noted earlier, District A's meeting occurs in early July whereas this same meeting occurs in September for District B. The difference in meeting months of the same type content creates a distinct advantage for District A. District A's Title I coordinator provided the following rationale:

We set this meeting for July for strategic purposes. We make our campus improvement plans due on the last Friday of July because by then we have received the Notice of Grant Award (NOGA) and we prefer that our campuses start spending their Title I allocations then. We prefer that they have things in place before school starts. This allows our kids the full year's benefit of the things that Title I money can provide them.

Principal A1 provided further elaboration about the timing of the July meeting as a strategy:

It is actually a headache trying to work around staff vacation time trying to get improvement plan meetings set up in July, but we do work and get this done and effectively plan. I would rather do this in the summer than when school starts, as there are so many other things to focus on in August and September. Additionally,

I can get my supplies ordered and likely on campus in time for the first day of school.

Principal A2 added, “This is my third year being a principal, but I could not imagine doing this later in the year. I don’t want to be working on or creating a plan at the same time that I need one.”

The timing of the annual meeting in District B operated in stark contrast. The District B meeting occurred in September and after the school year had begun. Both of the District B middle school principals reported that although the Title I money was appropriated to their campuses and could viewed in their budgets, they could not spend any Title I money until after the annual meeting that occurred each September. Principal B1 explained, “Even though we cannot spend money until the first weekday of September, I still have my purchase orders ready to go, and we order everything that we have planned when we are allowed.” Principal B2 referred to not knowing “it was possible to order anything before the start of school. I thought this was a federal or state rule. It would be good if we could order things before school starts.”

When Title I coordinator of District B was asked why campus principals were not allowed to make purchases before the start of the school year, the coordinator responded that “this is one of the rules that the purchasing department has in place, and we honor the request.” This agreement between the Title I coordinator and the purchasing department in District B created a situation that prevented any Title I money from being spent until late into September. Consequently, teachers and students would not receive goods or services until late into October, potentially after the first 6 weeks of the school year have

already passed. The difference in the timing of the annual meeting between District A and District B meant District A's high-performing middle schools had an enormous head start in executing the campus improvement plans each year. The low-performing middle schools of District B did not have the opportunity to execute their campus improvement plans before students arrived on campus annually.

Summary

This chapter provided the findings derived from the analysis of the qualitative data collected in this comparative case study. The findings illuminated the aspects of planning and decision making affecting two high performing and two low performing middle schools serving similar student populations between two school districts in Texas. The participants represented a wealth of experience levels as principals and Title I coordinators and were richly involved in the planning and decision-making process as district spend Title I money. A total of nine themes emerged in the findings:

- Theme 1: The allocation process is considered a quick and simple process where the word threshold is not widely used in District A.
- Theme 2: Choosing to allow the natural and authentic campus data to be the leading guide creates funding allocation consistency in District A.
- Theme 3: The Title I coordinator's choice of the Title I qualifying cut point has a profound impact on all campuses' allocations in District B.
- Theme 4: Consistency from year to year is preferred but is difficult to achieve in District B.

Theme 5: Redundancy of information is necessary within the annual Title I meeting.

Theme 6: Similarities in the items and agendas discussed at the annual meeting.

Theme 7: The need for ongoing support throughout the year.

Theme 8: District size and diversity district affects efficiency.

Theme 9: The timing of the annual Title I meeting affects campus planning and efficiency.

The overarching themes represented the commonalities and disparities derived from the four principals, two Title I coordinators, and district- and campus-level artifacts. Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the findings and concludes the study.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Recommendations

Chapter 4 presented the findings for answering the research questions. This chapter has the summary of the study, summary of the findings, and a discussion of the findings. The chapter closes out the study with implications for policy and practice and recommendations for future research.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this research was to conduct a comparative case study for illuminating the aspects of planning and decision making between two high performing and two low performing middle schools serving similar student populations within two separate school districts. Two districts were represented by the participants in this study. One district had two high performing middle school campuses within it and the other district had two F-rated middle school campuses within it. Decisions for campus expenditures of Title I funding rests almost solely with campus principals, even though their training and professional development for budget development, management, and best practices in using Title I money is regarded as minimal or nonexistent (Reeves, 2018). Middle school settings were chosen as the focus of this exploratory study due the importance of the middle school experience in preparing secondary students for the rigors of high school (Santamaria & Santamaria, 2013).

For answering the research questions, the researcher collected data from semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom with both districts' Title I coordinators and middle school principals and from artifacts that included both districts' and all four campus' improvement plans. The researcher engaged in reflective journaling for

developing the thick, rich descriptions. However, the four campus principals who crafted their federally required Campus Improvement Plans and determined the most appropriate uses of federal Title I money provided the majority of the data. The following four major research questions were answered for understanding the allocations of the Title I funds available to middle school principals throughout the fiscal and academic year:

1. What is the ongoing planning and decision-making process for the allocation, distribution, and utilization of Title I funds for the high-performing middle schools?
2. What is the ongoing planning and decision-making process for the allocation, distribution, and utilization of Title I funds for the low-performing middle schools?
3. What ongoing middle school planning and decision-making processes for the allocation, distribution, and utilization of Title I funds are shared between the low-performing and high-performing middle schools?
4. What differences exist in the ongoing planning and decision-making process for the allocation, distribution, and utilization of Title I funds between low-performing and high-performing middle schools?

Summary of the Findings

This study was a comparative case study that illuminated the aspects of planning and decision making between two high performing and two low performing middle schools serving similar student populations within the two school districts. The participants represented a wealth of experience levels as principals and Title I

coordinators and were richly involved in the planning and decision-making process as districts spend Title I money. This section addresses the meanings of the findings between the cases of District A and District B in the study that involved applying a constructivist approach to understand how four participating Title I principals in two districts along with their respective Title I coordinators constructed meaning from their experiences within the decision making and planning processes of their districts. A total of nine themes emerged in the findings:

- Theme 1: The allocation process is considered a quick and simple process where the word threshold is not widely used in District A.
- Theme 2: Choosing to allow the natural and authentic campus data to be the leading guide creates funding allocation consistency in District A.
- Theme 3: The Title I coordinator's choice of the Title I qualifying cut point has a profound impact on all campuses' allocations in District B.
- Theme 4: Consistency from year to year is preferred but is difficult to achieve in District B.
- Theme 5: Redundancy of information is necessary within the annual Title I meeting.
- Theme 6: Similarities in the items and agendas discussed at the annual meeting.
- Theme 7: The need for ongoing support throughout the year.
- Theme 8: District size and diversity district affects efficiency.

Theme 9: The timing of the annual Title I meeting affects campus planning and efficiency.

The overarching themes represented the commonalities and comparisons between districts in the data provided by the four principals and two Title I coordinators. Each theme is interpreted in this section.

Theme 1: The Allocation Process is Considered a Quick and Simple Process Where the Word Threshold is not Widely Used in District A

Due to the similarity of each of the campuses' demographics compared to the entire district, the determination of the threshold is a very simple process that involves a minimal amount of personnel discussion. The district's academic advisory council has created a policy of wanting all schools in the district to receive funding. This policy has indirectly led to a very stable funding environment as the Title I coordinator simply moves the qualifying threshold percentage to the same as the campus with the lowest economically disadvantaged percentage in the district. District A spends very little time determining what the Title I qualifying standard shall be.

Theme 2: Choosing to Allow the Natural and Authentic Campus Data to be the Leading Guide Creates District Funding Allocation Consistency in District A

The Title I coordinator of District A allows for the demographics of the entire district and that of the individual campuses to create a natural Title I qualifying threshold for the district. The nature and stability of campus demographics is leading to a very stable Title I financing environment. The fewer choices made by district and campus personnel maintains a fair, equitable, and stable funding environment that allows the

campus leadership to include a comprehensive spending plan within their campus improvement plans and begin spending funds before the start of the school year.

Theme 3: Choosing to Allow the Natural and Authentic Campus Data to be the Leading Guide Creates District Funding Allocation Consistency in District A

Each of the Title I coordinators agreed that a determination of the Title I qualifying threshold for the district is the most critical job of the Title I coordinator. The coordinators further agreed that the threshold eventually applied can affect all the Title I recipient campuses in the district. Ultimately the decision of determining the best qualifying threshold involves much human discussion and negotiation where the decision to fund one campus can drastically affect funding at another campus. Due to overall district size and individual campus diversity within them, the large district had a difficult time determining a qualifying threshold that does not negatively impact some campuses and will involve other key staff members in the threshold determination process.

Theme 4: Consistency from Year to Year is Preferred but is Difficult to Achieve in District B

Each of the two principals and their Title I coordinator expressed the need and significance of having a consistent amount of funding from year to year. The constant exodus of economically disadvantaged students from District A leads to continual reduction of federal funding along with a threshold wildly varying qualifying standard can drastically impact campus Title I funding. Inconsistent funding structures lead to lack of early planning opportunities. The reliance of principal input has been the best attempt at creating a more stable environment.

Theme 5: Redundancy of Information is Necessary Within the Annual Title I Meeting

All four campus principals along with their Title I coordinators commented on the redundancy of the annual Title I meetings in both districts. The Title I coordinators admitted that the information is primarily the same from year to year. The redundancy is due mostly to lack of change in the federal policy with Title I. Regretfully the information the Title I coordinators are required to deliver will not change as long as federal policy remains inert.

Theme 6: Similarities in the Items and Agendas Discussed at the Annual Meeting

A discussion with both Title I coordinators led to a discovery of the same items being discussed at Title I meetings. Both districts prioritized campus improvement plan completion, a review of district goals, and a review of the supplementation versus supplanting Title I funds rules. The fact that these topics were in alignment leads to the importance of each of these items.

Theme 7: The Need for Ongoing Support Through the Year

Each of the four principals interviewed thought highly of their Title I coordinators and the level of support they frequently receive. The Title I coordinators were aware of the principal perceptions and take pride in their work. The Title I coordinators work to support the campus leadership due to the desire to implement the grant according to policy. The Title I coordinators both stated that they feel they best support principals by being available to their phone calls and having frequent and impromptu conversations with principals when the principals reach out.

Theme 8: District Size and Diversity Affects Efficiency

Goal alignment is critical in every school district. This size of a school district drastically impacts the ability to accomplish goal alignment. Campus diversity has a positive correlation with district size. The more diverse a district's schools are, the more difficult it is to achieve district goal alignment. The goals established by the district will not always align with certain campuses due to some campuses' diversity and districts will need to consider alternative and more appropriate goals for certain campuses.

Theme 9: Timing of Annual Meetings Affects Planning and Efficiency

The calendar placement of the required annual Title I meeting is the sole decision of the Title I coordinator. District A has their annual meeting in July whereas District B has their annual meeting in September. July is the earliest reasonable time to have the annual meeting and districts place the campuses in an extremely advantageous situation in the area of planning and spending Title I money if this meeting is held in July instead of September.

Discussion of the Findings

The data generated from interviews and a thorough examination of the campus and district improvement plans led to finding nine themes that represented this comparative case study. The nine themes answered the research questions and illuminated the aspects of planning and decision making between two high performing and two low performing middle schools serving similar student populations within two separate school districts. This section contains the discussion of how each of the themes

in this project either aligned with or contradicted current peer-reviewed articles or research.

Theme 1 Discussion: The Allocation Process is Considered a Quick and Simple Process Where the Word Threshold is not Widely Used in District A

To be eligible for Title I school funds, at least 40% of a school's students must be classified as eligible for the free or reduce lunch program, suggesting the students are low-income or economically disadvantaged (Clark, 2019). All Title I coordinators have the authority to choose to allocate Title I funding to any schools within their districts that meet the 40% of students as economically disadvantaged threshold. All of District A's campuses were above the qualifying standard and the District's Academic Advisory Council (DAAC) had taken the decision-making authority for these funds away from the Title I coordinator and required that all eligible district campuses would receive Title I funding. For this reason, the federally mandated 40% economic disadvantage qualifying threshold affected all District A campuses equally during the allocation process.

Theme 2 Discussion: Choosing to Allow the Natural and Authentic Campus Data to be the Leading Guide Creates District Funding Allocation Consistency in District A
The entire allocation process in District A appeared to be unusually simple.

District A's allocation process was entirely reliant on campus and district data that prohibited the Title I coordinator from having any discretion for manipulating differences in funding between campuses. District A officials were required to use the funds in their school districts to target schools with the highest concentration of students from low-income families. Schools with higher percentages of economic disadvantage received

Title I funds that were proportional to their percentages of students of economic disadvantage.

Roza and Hill (2004) showed that Title I funding targets providing aid to high-poverty schools, even though Title I funding often does not ensure that high poverty schools have greater resources than low-poverty schools in a given district. The process used in District A overcame the concerns highlighted by Roza and Hill's statement because District A allowed the campuses' natural student demographic data to determine how much funding each campus received. The campuses with the highest levels of poverty consistently received the highest levels of Title I funds.

Theme 3 Discussion: Choosing to Allow the Natural and Authentic Campus Data to be the Leading Guide Creates District Funding Allocation Consistency in District A

District B's allocation process can be described as murky at best. In most urban districts, a systematic bias implicit at the central district office supports the disproportionate funding of the schools located in more affluent neighborhoods (Miller, Hill, & Roza, 2005). The Title I coordinator in District B actually confirmed that implicit bias exists in this district and admitted the district increased the qualifying threshold when some learning communities did not want the stigma of being named a Title I campus." In District B, the Title I coordinator exhibited an enormous amount of power and influence in determining which campuses will receive funding and the ability to adjust the qualifying threshold annually. That same ability to determine and move the qualifying standard impacts campus Title I allocations within District B and created a volatile, unstable year to year budget environment for campus principals. In District B's

attempt to minimize bias, opinions of the members of the district's central leadership and certain campus principals are sought before making any annual eligibility threshold announcements. In the District B scenario, the Roza and Hill (2004) finding that Title I funding often does not ensure that high poverty schools have greater resources than low-poverty schools in a given district appeared to be confirmed. The process used in District B represented the concerns highlighted by Roza and Hill's statement because District B did not have processes designed to ensure a school's natural student demographic data would guarantee that a campus received Title I funding when eligible for these funds.

Theme 4 Discussion: Consistency from Year to Year is Preferred but is Difficult to Achieve in District B

Schools need to maintain consistency in funding for ensuring students' educational outcomes meet accountability standards (Leachman et al., 2017). Budget shortfalls from the state and local levels cause campuses to reduce the amount and quality of the educational services they can make available to students (Leachman et al., 2017). In District B, these findings by Leachman et al. (2017) were supported. Both of the principals of the F-rated middle school campuses expressed the need to use Title I money to reduce the sizes of the classes in their schools by hiring more teachers, expand learning time with before and after school tutoring, and enhance teacher quality through professional development.

District B principals stated that they had faced deep budget cuts from year to year and had found sustaining initiatives from one year to the next year was difficult and preferred to have consistency in funding amounts from year to year as recommended by

Roza and Hill (2004). The District B finding highlights the concern that deep cuts in state-level K-12 spending can undermine reforms that would benefit students of economic disadvantage. Limiting the funds generally available to improve schools and by terminating or undercutting specific reform initiatives (Leachman et al., 2017) clearly affected the performance of the two low-performing middle schools of District B based on the data provided by the principals and Title I coordinator.

Theme 5 Discussion: Redundancy of Information is Necessary Within the Annual Title I Meeting

Title I coordinators are federally mandated to provide training and professional development to the personnel of any campus receiving Title I funds. The training typically takes place in an annual meeting that usually occurs at the beginning of the school year, as was observed in this study's findings. The middle school principals, regardless of their schools' status as low or high performing, in both districts expressed having frustration with the meeting being used to address the same information from year to year.

With the inception of President Obama's reauthorization of the Title I grant programs in 2016, principals should have expected to see changes in the Title I presentations. However, the information provided in the annual training by the Title I coordinators has remained unchanged in 2020. A likely culprit is the confusion of information flowing from the U.S. Department of Education. Rentner, Frizell, and Kobler (2017) surveyed to 45 state-level education agencies asking about the sufficiency of the information they received from the federal government. Only 12 of the 45 states

responded favorably about the federal sharing of information being sufficient. Indeed, 55% of the respondents reported that the new information was not that clear enough.

Without clear guidance, the findings about the redundancy from year to year provided by the Title I coordinators is supported. The federal government needs to provide Title I coordinators with clarifications so that the Title I coordinators' professional development sessions can be revised (Rentner et al., 2017).

Theme 6 Discussion: Similarities in the Items and Agendas Discussed at the Annual Meeting

The similarities of the agenda and items for discussion at both districts' annual meetings were quickly noticed by the researcher. The Title I coordinators' attention to goal development and alignment with their respective districts' goals led to thorough discussions of campus improvement plan expectations and timelines, and both appeared on the annual Title I meeting agendas provided by both districts. This finding aligns with the requirement for providing annual training by Title I coordinators, and the Title I coordinators both received the federal training through one of the state's 20 regional Education Service Centers (ESC) prior to holding their district-level annual meetings.

The 20 regional ESCs provide training and requirement-related support to grantees (Texas Education Agency, 2020). Both districts' Title I coordinators followed the guidance of the Texas Education Agency (2020) by providing the following: (a) guidance to assist their school districts' efforts to improve student performance, (b) opportunity to operate schools with efficiency and economy, (c) ability to implement legislature- or commission-directed initiatives (Texas Education Agency, 2020). Even

though the principals may have been frustrated with the redundancies, the Title I coordinators followed the information they had been provided about Title I funding at the ESC-level of training.

Theme 7 Discussion: The Need for Ongoing Support Through the Year

All four campus principals in both districts stated that they received support from their Title I coordinators. Each district's Title I coordinator was aware of the significance of providing support to their middle schools' principals. The Title I coordinators supported the need for district-level leaders to work with principals on a reasonable set of high-priority leadership actions as recommended by Klocko and Wells (2015). Essentially, the finding supported the notion that even great school leaders, such as District A's principals of high performing middle schools, need coaches (Aguilar et al., 2011).

Theme 8 Discussion: District Size and Diversity Affects Efficiency

District A is widely considered a mid-size district with its 15 campuses. It has a little over 10,000 students whose majority is represented by Hispanic students of economic disadvantage. District B is considered a large district with over 100 campuses serving a diverse group of students both racially and economically.

Researchers contended that increased district size initially yields positive effects until a certain point when these increasing enrollment size trends are reversed and district size has deleterious effects on the academic performance of students (Slate & Jones, 2005). There were several observations and notations throughout this research that

pointed to the size of District B influencing management and oversight issues at its middle schools that could have affected the middle schools' F ratings.

Optimal school size can be defined by a range in which economic efficiency and educational outcomes both show positive relationships to school size (Slate & Jones, 2005). District A seemed to fit this optimal size description as their schools' sizes were big enough for appropriate staffing, teacher and principal support, and oversight. District A's student and campus needs were similar, yet the district was not so big that the management and oversight of its staff and campuses were negatively impacted.

Theme 9 Discussion: Timing of Annual Meetings Affects Planning and Efficiency

Many districts are struggling to implement the strategic plans they believe will improve student achievement and are hampered by limited resources (Levenson et al., 2014). Innovative approaches and comprehensive solutions are needed to align the resources to support student success (Levenson et al., 2014). District A's participants understood the time and attention needed to create a thorough and comprehensive campus improvement plan led to student success, and they began applying their plans at their annual meeting each July, well before students arrived for the first day of school.

However, District B's annual Title I meeting did not appear on the calendar until September. District B did not allocate and apply Title I funds to benefit students until well into the each school year. District B's middle school principals received little time to focus on crafting well-aligned campus improvement plans. District A's timing supports Levenson et al.'s (2014) assertions, while District B's meeting timing contradicted recommendations for using Title I funds for supporting campus improvement plans.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The implications for future policy and practice lies solely with the large districts. This study clearly uncovered how small to mid-size districts have advantages built into their processes and policies that produce sound practices simply due to size. Many of the problems identified in this study are a direct result of lack of oversight due to so many campuses within a district to keep a watchful eye on or the degree of diversity of the numerous campuses that fall under the overarching leadership and decision-making of a large district. It was frequently noted within the data that District B's policies, procedures, and decisions were not ideal for its two F-rated middle school campuses.

Unintentionally, the State of Texas has wrestled some of these failing schools from big districts with the creation of Senate Bill (SB) 1882. The SB 1882 incentivized school districts to relinquish local control over campus operations, governance, and budgets to much smaller partner entities that could take the form of charter school, private school, private childcare provider, non-profit organization, or higher education institution. Because of the lack of oversight or fit that will traditionally occur in large districts for some campuses, SB 1822 allowed a district to use a partnership entity to operate a separate governing board, to hire and manage personnel, and to control campus budgets. This special partnership allows the governing board to create campus-specific policies on a particular campus or small set of campuses and provides campuses managed by the partner with tailored oversight.

To meet the SB 1882 standards a campus or its community would have to wait for the school to have a minimum of 4 consecutive failing years of not meeting the state

accountability standards. Large districts, up to this point, have not handed these campuses over willingly due to loss of overall district funding and the negative perception that handing over an entire school to a partner organization would create. Large districts, however, should not wait until a campus falls into an ongoing improvement required situation and should proactively establish smaller pods, or groupings, of schools within their district based on demographics, funding qualifications, and academic outcomes that can be better managed through a contractual partnership. A great example of this pod model would be to fund the campuses selected to be in a particular pod with a separate and more appropriate Title I qualifying standard where their funding would exceed the previous distributions that would have been applied using a single, disproportional qualifying standard across campuses with different percentages of eligibilities among students.

Under a partnership scenario, large districts like District B would have the opportunity to create the advantageous situations for sharing the resources that would allow them to follow through on communal goals and campus improvement plans in ways that exist in the small to midsize districts like District A. A single decision for one campus within a demographically and accountability aligned pod of schools would likely eliminate the one-size fits all decisions that are typically made in large districts composed of diverse schools with diverse and unique needs. Further, exceptions to the goals that need to be included in their campus improvement plans could easily be established and be more appropriate for a particular set of campuses.

Recommendations for Future Research

This qualitative study investigated the ongoing planning and decision-making process by educational leaders at the district/campus level due to a lack of current literature regarding the planning process of district and campus level staff. As a result of this research, this study determined other suggestions for future research relating to the planning process:

1. This study was limited to districts in Texas, a state that ranks 36th in America in the receipt of Title funding per student, a qualitative study of the planning process in other states that are well above that ranking may be needed and could provide additional insights that could prove useful to districts in their pursuit to plan appropriately.
2. This study was initially intended to be a study of four to six campuses that were within a single Texas Education Agency created 40-campus comparison group. Schools within a campus group of 40 come from a variety of school districts; however, due to Covid-19, access to the principals in the districts that met the comparison group criteria were denied. Therefore, a replication of this study within the same 40-campus comparison group is needed. An attempt to examine and compare the planning practices of schools in the top and bottom quartile of the same group could add greater depth of information and new understanding of the differences in professional practice between low- and high-performing middle schools and their respective school districts.

3. This project was focused on the Title I decision making and planning processes at the both the district and middle school campus levels. The data revealed information about goal alignment to actual practice. A case study specific to the alignment between the actual funding practices or realities occurring on Title I campuses versus what appears in campus and district improvement plans.
4. This study revealed differences in certain activities affecting low- and high-performing middle schools, such as the annual Title I meeting and the timing of eligibility to spend the allocated Title I money by the principal. More quantitative research is needed to determine just how impactful the single decision of the timing of releasing funds to campuses has on students' academic outcomes and the nature of the possible correlations regarding when districts allow campuses to spend Title I funds.
5. The USDOE provides a wide range of resources that can be purchased with Title I funding. District A only allocated money to the campuses and left it up to the campuses after funding district level positions for the benefit of the entire district while District B funded very few district-assigned positions using Title I money and instead assigned larger amounts of Title I funds directly to campuses that were applied at the full discretion of the campus principal. The philosophy of spending emerged throughout this research not only in the area of when to spend but also regarding what purchase. Therefore,

a qualitative study of the philosophy of spending at the district and campus levels is needed.

The researcher conducted the case study to collect the perceptions and practices of experienced principals between high- and low-performing middle schools who had a few years of experience on their respective campuses. Because of the amount of turnover documented in the literature regarding the leadership and teacher levels at Title I campuses, a study of the perceptions and experiences of new and inexperienced principals who are learning to manage budgets and Title I funds is needed for providing knowledge to policymakers about the nature of the supports that could be used to ensure longevity in the principal role.

Conclusion to the Study

This study was conducted in 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic that affected the operations of all public schools in Texas. The study was meant to reflect typical practices regarding Title I middle schools that were high and low performing between two different districts; however, the participants were challenged to discuss the data without reflecting on how Covid-19 had affected their efforts to execute their previously set campus improvement plans.

Covid-19 forced many school districts to make adjustments to their policies and practices at a level heretofore never seen in U.S public education. The school systems that adjusted well to change in Covid-19 had to be nimble and ready to adapt on a constant basis. The swift and abrupt changes forced upon districts' and campuses' leaders required a viable system of communication and more campus specific responses.

Alignment and collaboration between campuses and districts is more necessary in Covid- 19 than it was before Covid-19. Districts like District A in this study will likely continue to produce high performing schools, but large districts like District B will continue to struggle with making overarching decisions about how to serve the students across diverse campuses. This research clearly demonstrated the advantages that exist in a smaller district of 11,000 students, such as District A. These advantages need to be replicated in large school districts, such as District B. Homogenous demographics seem to be the key to establishing goals, policies, oversight, and more importantly funding strategies that are fair and consistent for all schools within the smaller school district. However, if the large districts are willing to dismantle long existing barriers and structures within their organizations, they can produce similar results. The large school districts should strongly consider grouping their diverse campuses into comparable sets of campuses, such as the pods discussed earlier, that group campuses together to share similar demographics and to collaborate. These large districts should be willing to allow those campuses to be governed by a different set of policies, goals, and funding structures.

This thought is not new as SB 1882 provided the means for engaging in such activity at the district and school level. SB 1882 is the Texas Education Agency's best attempt to change the governance of struggling campuses and create structures that specifically fit the needs of chronically low-performing campuses. Because SB 1882 interventions are not accessible unless a campus has failed its students and community for several consecutive years, large districts should be willing to follow the inspiration of

SB 1882 to create their own partnerships and exceptions or to allow alternative campus improvement strategies to be established for their chronically low-performing campuses. Change to the ongoing structures of public education in Texas is required to ensure that the unexpected educational delivery issues that ushered in new realities in the Covid-19 pandemic must be amplified to ensure the challenges are overcome instead of becoming generational challenges that parents, students, and stakeholders are expected to cope with in the long term. It is up to educational leaders and their school boards to look within at their current structures and systems and make changes from what has long been the status quo, and that includes planning for using Title I monies before the academic year begins and aligning plans between campus and district levels.

Appendix A: Interview Guide

Warm-up and Background Questions for both Principal and Title I coordinator

1. Tell me about your history as an educator:
 - a. What roles have you held?
 - b. How did you come to be a principal/Title I coordinator?
 - c. What specific education and training have you completed that you feel prepares you for your current position?
 - d. How long have you been principal/Title I coordinator?
2. What prior experience in the manipulation and management of any school budgets did you have before becoming a principal/Title I Coordinator?

Interview Questions Aligned to Research Question 1: (Campus Principals)

1. Describe the training or professional development that you received in the development of the Campus/District Improvement plan?
 - a. Follow-up Question: What are your thoughts about the Title I coordinator's professional development to prepare you to lead in the development of your own Campus/District Improvement Plan?
2. How would you describe your planning process in the development of the Campus/District Improvement Plan?
 - a. Follow-up Question: What are your thoughts about this process?
3. How would you describe your involvement in the development of the District Improvement Plan?

- a. Follow-up Question: What role did the District Improvement Plan play in the crafting of your own Campus Improvement Plan?

Interview Questions Aligned to Question 2: (District Title I Coordinators)

- 4. Describe the process for the receipt of Title I funds from the SEA?
 - a. Follow-up question: In what ways do you agree/disagree with the SEA process?
 - b. Follow-up question: Has the creation of HB3 affected your district Title I allocations from TEA?
- 5. Describe your process for the determination of district allocations of Title I funds to its Title I campuses?
 - a. Follow-up Question: In what ways do you agree/disagree with this process?
 - b. Follow-up Question: Does the district consider the actual aggregate of teacher salaries versus using an average teacher salary that is commonly used when allocating district funds to ensure equity?
 - c. What is your district's Title I qualifying low-SES threshold and do you agree/disagree with this threshold
- 6. Describe the times when district exceptions are made to the normal allocation patterns of its campuses?
- 7. What feelings do you have about Title I funds being allocated equitably to the schools in need?

8. How do you encourage Title I principals to use funds to impact the acquisition of more experienced teachers, smaller class sizes, providing more instructional time, or implementing programs that are generally unavailable in the district as a whole?
9. How frequently do you conduct Title I specific meetings/professional development with only Title I principals?
 - a. Follow-up question: Describe how you form the agenda for these meetings/professional development?
 - b. Follow-up question: How would you assess the overall effectiveness of these meetings/professional development?

Interview Questions Aligned to Question 3: Campus Principals

10. How would you describe the process you use to make decisions of how to allocate and utilize Title I money?
 - a. Follow-up question: Explain the process you use to determine who else to involve in this decision.
11. Describe your level of proficiency in the development and management of the overall campus budget?
 - a. Follow up question: What additional professional development have you gained in this area?
12. What are your perceptions of the utilization of Title I funds to what was planned in your Campus Improvement Plans?

Interview Questions Aligned to Question 4: (Title I Coordinator)

13. What campus principal practices have you identified that you would consider separating factors between the low-performing middle school campuses and the high performing middle school campuses?
14. What are your perceptions of the differences between the Campus Improvement Plans of low-performing middle schools and high performing middle schools?
15. Describe the professional development that is provided to campus principals in the area of Campus Improvement Plan development?
 - a. Follow-up question: Describe what limitations you experience when providing professional development to the principals?
16. Describe the professional development that is provided to campus principals in the area of best practices for Title I funds usage.
17. What questions did you anticipate being asked that I failed to ask?

Closing Questions

- 1A. Principals of B-rated campuses: What do you believe to be the most effective use of Title I money with the greatest academic results on your campus?
- 1B. Principals of F-rated campuses: What do you believe needs to be changed to increase the effectiveness of the use of Title I money for achieving the greatest results on your campus?
2. Principals of All Campuses: Where did you gather research about the budgeting and programming decisions you make throughout the year?

- a. Who all gets involved in the decision making process?
 - b. What support did you need and get from Title I coordinator?
- 3. Is there anything that I did not inquire about that you would like to share?

Appendix B: IRB Approval Letter



OFFICE OF RESEARCH SUPPORT & COMPLIANCE

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

*P.O. Box 7426, Austin, Texas 78713 · Mail Code A3200
(512) 471-8871 · FAX (512) 471-8873*

FWA # 00002030

Date: 07/22/2020
PI: Victor Saenz
Dept: Educational Administration
Title: How District Leaders and Middle School Principals use Title I Funds at the Campus Level: A Study of the ongoing planning and decision-making process by educational leaders at the district/campus level

Re: IRB Exempt Determination for Protocol Number 2020-07-0085

Dear Victor Saenz,

Recognition of Exempt status based on 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2).

This determination is for a three year period beginning on 07/22/2020 and ending on 07/21/2023 at 12 a.m. midnight. A progress report will be required prior to this end date if research is still ongoing.

Responsibilities of the Principal Investigator:

Research that is determined to be Exempt from Institutional Review Board (IRB) review is not exempt from ensuring protection of human subjects. The Principal Investigator (PI) is responsible for the following throughout the conduct of the research study:

1. Assuring that all investigators and co-principal investigators are trained in the ethical principles, relevant federal regulations, and institutional policies governing human subject research.
2. Disclosing to the subjects that the activities involve research and that participation is voluntary during the informed consent process.
3. Providing subjects with pertinent information (e.g., risks and benefits, contact information for investigators and RSC) and ensuring that human subjects will voluntarily consent to participate in the research when appropriate (e.g., surveys, interviews).
4. Assuring the subjects will be selected equitably, so that the risks and benefits of the research are justly distributed.
5. Assuring that the IRB will be immediately informed of any information or unanticipated problems that may increase the risk to the subjects and cause the category of review to be reclassified to expedited or full board review.
6. Assuring that the IRB will be immediately informed of any complaints from subjects regarding their risks and benefits.
7. Assuring that the privacy of the subjects and the confidentiality of the research data will be maintained appropriately to ensure minimal risks to subjects.

8. Reporting, by submission of an amendment request, any changes in the research study that alter the level of risk to subjects.

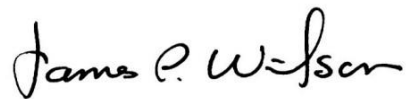
These criteria are specified in the PI Assurance Statement that must be signed before determination of exempt status will be granted. The PI's signature acknowledges that they understand and accept these conditions. Refer to the Office of Research Support & Compliance (RSC) website www.utexas.edu/irb for specific information on training, voluntary informed consent, privacy, and how to notify the IRB of unanticipated problems.

1. Closure: Upon completion of the research study, a Closure Report must be submitted to the RSC.
2. Unanticipated Problems: Any unanticipated problems or complaints must be reported to the IRB/RSC immediately. Further information concerning unanticipated problems can be found in the IRB Policies and Procedure Manual.
3. 3-Year Progress Report: A 3-Year Progress Report must be submitted if the study will continue beyond the three-year qualifying period.
4. Amendments: Modifications that affect the exempt category or the criteria for exempt determination must be submitted as an amendment. Investigators are strongly encouraged to contact the IRB Program Coordinator(s) to describe any changes prior to submitting an amendment. The IRB Program Coordinator(s) can help investigators determine if a formal amendment is necessary or if the modification does not require a formal amendment process.

IRB approval of your research indicates that your study meets the federal criteria for approval of research involving human participants. This approval does not grant permission to proceed with on-campus research activity and/or in-person research interactions with human participants. Please seek approval from your college or unit administration to proceed with any research activities that cannot be conducted remotely. Learn more information about the university's research restart plan and phases here:
<https://research.utexas.edu/covid-19-research-faq/>

If you have any questions contact the RSC by phone at (512) 471-8871 or via e-mail at irb@austin.utexas.edu.

Sincerely,



James Wilson, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board Chair

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